

The Mall

The heat of late August made Alexandra Quick's bedroom a hot, stuffy cell, even with the window open and a fan blowing. It had been a very hot summer in Larkin Mills, and the previous day, the air conditioning in their unit had gone out. The apartment superintendent had called the maintenance contractors, but said they might not get it repaired until later that day, or even the next.

Normally, Alexandra would have escaped the stifling heat of her room by going outside, where at least she'd be able to feel a breeze, and possibly go hang out at the bookstore or the SuperMart, or even the mall, but she was grounded – again.

She'd actually been very good this summer. She'd been grounded for two days, back in July, for back-talking her stepfather, but after that, she'd managed to stay out of trouble for almost two months, until now. Of course, that was in large part because she spent so little time interacting with her parents. Her stepfather was a police officer, and her mother was a nurse, and usually one of them was at work while the other was at home sleeping. Alexandra took every opportunity to get out of the small, cramped apartment they'd been living in since their house burned down last Christmas, so she usually only saw her parents in the morning or in the evening.

Now, however, she was grounded, and Archie was home, which meant she couldn't get away with sneaking out, and she had nothing to do.

Not even allowed to practice my magic, she thought bitterly, twirling her wand between her fingers as she lay on her bed. It was so tempting to cast one little spell, just to reassure herself that she still could. She hadn't been able to do one bit of magic all summer! But she knew that one little spell would likely result in the Trace Office sending her another nasty letter for violating the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy, possibly followed by a Howler from Ms. Grimm, the Dean of Charmbridge Academy. Alexandra didn't want to think about what a Howler would sound like in this tiny apartment.

There was a black flurry of wings at her window, and then a large raven swooped past her head and landed on a bedpost, squawking.

“At least you can go out, Charlie,” she said sullenly. The raven squawked at her again – a little smugly, Alexandra thought. Then she saw that there was a small gold chain dangling from Charlie's beak.

“Not again!” she yelled. She sat up and lunged for the dangling jewelry. Charlie went flapping up to the ceiling, then fluttered to the top of a bookcase. Alexandra chased Charlie around the room, slamming the window shut so the bird couldn't fly back out, until she accidentally knocked the fan over trying to snatch the chain away. It hit the floor and made a horrible sound as its blades went 'Whack! Whack! Whack!' against the inside of the wire safety cage, and then the cage split open and the fan died.

Alexandra cursed, set the fan back up, snapped the wire cage back into place, and tried to turn it on again, but something must have broken during its fall. The motor just hummed ineffectually, while the blades refused to move.

She beat her fists on her desk, and turned to glare angrily at her familiar.

“Isn't it bad enough I'm grounded?” she yelled. “Now you're stealing stuff, and I'm going to die 'cause it's so hot in here!”

She was interrupted by a fist pounding on the wall. “Alex, what's all that noise? I'm trying to sleep!” her stepfather yelled from the next room. “I just got off a twelve-hour shift; is it too much to ask that you give me just a little peace and quiet?”

Alexandra rolled her eyes and gritted her teeth. “Sorry!” she yelled back, not sounding very sorry. “I accidentally knocked something over.” She turned her head and glared at Charlie. “See?” she whispered. “You're already getting me into more trouble!”

She raised her arm to her forehead, wiping away sweat and brushing her bangs out of her eyes, and then threw herself angrily back onto her bed.

Charlie did not appear moved by Alexandra's imminent demise, but after a moment, the raven tilted its head, and then Alexandra heard a jingle as the chain dropped onto her desk.

Staring up at the ceiling, she said, "You're going to get me into so much trouble if you do that at school."

Charlie squawked, a little more softly this time. It might have been an apology. Alexandra closed her eyes and sighed.

Then she heard footsteps, followed by a knock on her bedroom door. "Come out here, Alex," called her stepfather.

Alexandra frowned. Now what? She was already grounded. Was Archie planning on yelling at her some more? That wasn't going to help him sleep any better, she thought, but she knew better than to say so. She sat up, gave Charlie another glare, and snatched the gold chain off her desk with one quick motion. Charlie squawked angrily, but Alexandra ignored the bird's protest as she pulled open a desk drawer and dumped the chain with all the other trinkets and baubles her familiar had 'collected' over the summer. She slammed the drawer shut, and then went to open her bedroom door.

Her stepfather stood in front of her, in shorts and a stained white t-shirt; broad, ruddy-faced, sweaty, and annoyed. Archie Green had married her mother when Alexandra was only a few years old, and he was as much of a father as she had ever known. Now, he looked tired, but mostly he looked exasperated, as he usually did when trying to deal with his unusual and troublesome stepdaughter.

Alexandra just stared up at him, waiting for another lecture.

Instead, to her surprise, he handed her a wad of folded-up twenties.

"Go to the mall," he said. "Get your school clothes."

Stunned, she took the money as if she weren't sure it was real. She looked back up at him.

“School clothes?” she repeated, in disbelief.

“You'll need new clothes for school, right? You've been talking about it all week. Do you need your mother along?”

Several thoughts went through Alexandra's head at once. The first was that Archie was right, except he hadn't been paying enough attention – what Alexandra had been talking about all week was her upcoming trip to Chicago to buy school supplies. Charmbridge Academy would be sending a bus to take her and other students whose parents weren't able to bring them to the Goblin Market. Of course, Alexandra didn't mention the Goblin Market by name, but she had been talking about buying her school clothes and supplies in Chicago, not here in Larkin Mills.

Her second thought was that Archie was only willing to let her go on her own so he could sleep. Well, maybe there was another reason. He probably didn't want to accompany her while she bought underwear and things, and she certainly agreed with that sentiment.

Her third thought was that she was supposed to be grounded, but she decided not to point that out either. As if reading her mind, Archie said gruffly, “Make sure you're back before your mother gets home. I don't want another argument with her. But she's not going to have any days off until late next week.” He pointed at the handful of bills. “And that's to cover all of your clothes and school supplies, understand? Anything that's not covered by your scholarship.”

Alexandra nodded. That meant she needed to hold onto the money until next week, when she could convert it to wizard money at the Goblin Market, but for an opportunity to get out of the apartment, she certainly wasn't going to argue. And she did need new underwear, which she could just as easily buy here as in Chicago.

“Can I buy a cell phone?” she asked.

“No!” Archie snapped. Alexandra had asked this about a dozen times this summer, and the answer was always the same. Until getting grounded this week, she had had hopes that if she managed to keep herself out of trouble long enough, the answer might change.

“Fine,” she muttered. She stepped back into her bedroom, and closed the door.

Despite Archie's refusal to bend on the cell phone, Alexandra's mood had gone from sullen and bored to gleeful. She smirked at Charlie, and pointed at the large birdcage hanging by her desk. “Get in,” she commanded.

Charlie squawked indignantly. The cage was for travel, and a place to sleep, but rarely did Alexandra actually lock the bird inside it. But Alexandra pointed again, adamantly. “Now you're grounded!” she said. “If I leave the window closed, you'll probably die in here, and I'm not leaving the window open for you to go flying out and steal more junk. So get in your cage!”

The raven made a rude noise that very eloquently said, 'You can't be serious.' In response, Alexandra brandished her wand, and growled, “Charlie,” in her most ominous voice.

Looking highly offended, Charlie hopped into the cage, and gave Alexandra a resentful, beady-eyed glare, and another angry squawk as she pushed the cage door shut and latched it. Alexandra was relieved that Charlie had never called her bluff. Even if she weren't worried about the Trace Office, she didn't think she could bear to actually punish her familiar.

“You have to stop stealing stuff,” she said quietly, as she opened the window to let a little air back in, and made sure Charlie's cage was positioned in the shade, and that the bird's water bottle was full. Huffily, the raven fluffed its wings in response, and seemed to be ignoring her.

Alexandra put on her shoes and socks, then pulled her backpack out from under her bed, carefully put the money Archie had given her in one of the interior pockets, and pushed her wand all the way to the bottom. She then went to the kitchen and added a juice bottle, some cookies, and a SnackPac lunch to her bag, and hurried out the door, before Archie changed his mind about letting her go. As she left, she almost laughed at the irony: she was grounded because she had

gone home and stayed there without parental supervision, and now she was being released and sent to the mall without parental supervision because her stepfather didn't want her at home.

Her grounding was totally unfair to begin with. Why did her parents think she couldn't be left alone during the day? Alexandra was twelve, which meant she was almost a teenager, which meant she didn't need anyone to watch her.

At least, that was how she saw it. Unfortunately, her parents saw it differently. While Alexandra had always been an extremely independent child, and had spent more than a few afternoons at home alone because of her parents' work schedules, they had decided that leaving her unsupervised all summer wasn't acceptable. They were no longer living on Sweetmaple Avenue, with her friend Brian Seabury and his stay-at-home mom down the street, and nearby parks and fields for the kids to play in. Instead, they were stuck in an apartment in downtown Larkin Mills. The superintendent didn't appreciate children running around unsupervised in the complex, and Alexandra's mother didn't trust her not to get into trouble, hanging out on the streets all day.

That was how Alexandra wound up going to Vacation Bible School.

This was, in her opinion, the dumbest idea her mother had ever had. It was like a bad joke. Alexandra had never been to church in her life, and she doubted her mother or stepfather had either. If she'd known what the alternative was going to be, she might have said yes to soccer camp or the YMCA summer daycare program, but she wasn't really interested in soccer, and she knew Brian and Bonnie Seabury, along with Billy Boggleston and his annoying friends, were going to be at the YMCA program. Alexandra foolishly thought that refusing those two options would mean her parents would have no choice but to just let her stay home unsupervised.

Instead, her mother had enrolled her in the Larkin Mills Baptist Church's Vacation Bible School over the summer. Alexandra was horrified.

She did make an honest effort to behave herself, though. She really wanted a cell phone.

The first day, she was sent home with a note saying that shorts weren't allowed; girls had to wear long pants or dresses. So Alexandra wore long pants, even in the sweltering heat of summer. One of the other girls whispered confidentially to her that skirts were much cooler, which Alexandra supposed was probably true, but she'd wear a dress when hell froze over. Saying that aloud got her sent home with another note.

After that, she managed to avoid getting sent home with any more notes, but Larkin Mills Baptist Bible School was week after week of unending misery. She wasn't overtly defiant, but the Bible school teachers were very concerned about her soul nonetheless; she refused to pray or memorize Bible verses or sing hymns, and she was resistant to all their 'counseling' attempts. She counted down the days until summer would end and she could go back to Charmbridge Academy, whose teachers were sometimes just as crazy as those at Larkin Mills Baptist Bible School, and not always as nice, but at least they taught things that made sense to her. She wanted to do magic again so very badly.

Then, in the last week of Vacation Bible School, came the Evils of Witchcraft.

It was Alexandra's unchurched upbringing that made her Bible school teachers' sudden assault on magic and witchcraft so shocking. She didn't think Muggles believed in magic; she never expected to find out that some of them did, and thought it was all dark and evil. The Evils of Witchcraft lessons started with a condemnation of a popular children's book series, which Alexandra had read and found entertaining, albeit completely wrong in every detail when it came to magic. These books, the teachers told them, encouraged witchcraft, which led to devil worship.

Alexandra spent the next couple of days aghast and appalled. She knew that if she argued, they'd just think she was lying or crazy. Unless they actually believed her, which might be even worse. So

she folded her arms and glowered silently, while the teachers talked about all the other things that constituted 'witchcraft.'

But the last straw was when Amy Gavello raised her hand and asked if it was true that the Bible said that witches should be put to death, and one of the teachers immediately replied, "Yes, thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."

A couple of the other teachers hastily clarified, adding that the Bible also said Thou shalt not kill, which meant they weren't allowed to go around burning witches. But then during lunch, Amy and her friends started talking about witches' familiars, which according to Amy were actually demons in disguise. Then Davan MacLeod (who made quite a show of his love for Jesus during Prayer & Confession) said he thought cats were evil anyway. Then he started talking about the stray cats and crows he'd shot with his air gun, laughing as he dramatically described the noises they made.

While the other boys laughed, and the girls just made faces, Alexandra felt something snap inside her. Her wand was always in a pocket or in her book bag, because she didn't like leaving it at home, but she'd never been so tempted to use it on a Muggle before.

Davan suddenly made gagging noises and spit up the milk he'd been drinking. Amy did the same thing, choking on the fruit juice she had just swallowed. Then one of her friends shrieked and dropped her sandwich as if it had bitten her.

"There are worms in my sandwich!" she screamed.

Around the lunch table, milk instantly curdled, juice went sour, and food became inedible, rotten and crawling with bugs. Alexandra's erstwhile classmates ran for the restrooms, or threw up right there at the table.

Wordlessly, Alexandra stood up and marched out of the classroom where they all ate lunch, and left Larkin Mills Baptist Church before any of the teachers noticed she was gone.

Of course, they noticed after lunch, and frantically called both her parents at work. Once Archie and Claudia Green determined that Alexandra had simply gone home, they told her to stay there, and then her mother and stepfather both yelled at her, in turn, when they got home. Alexandra declared that she wasn't going back to Vacation Bible School, that they'd have to tie her up and drag her there if they intended her to go, and that if they did, she'd run away from Larkin Mills Baptist Church as soon as she was able, so they shouldn't even bother.

Since there were only two days left in the week, her mother told her, furiously, that if she really wanted to stay home that badly, she could, but she was grounded until she went back to school.

That was how Alexandra came to be grounded, and she still thought it was unfair. What was worse was the fact that she couldn't really tell her mother why she'd pitched a fit over the stupid Vacation Bible School in the final week, after having endured it for almost two months. Her mother and her stepfather still didn't really know that Alexandra was a witch, didn't quite grasp that Charmbridge Academy was not a normal school, and Alexandra had yet to figure out how to explain it to them, or whether she should.

She waited nervously all the next day for an owl from the Trace Office to arrive, or a Howler, but nothing happened as a result of her spontaneous magical outburst. Maybe they could tell when it was an accident and wouldn't count it against her, she thought, but she suspected she was going to hear about it, sooner or later.

The Larkin Mills Mall was a new addition to the downtown area. It had only opened a few years ago, and had become a favorite hangout of the town's teens. Alexandra didn't intend to buy much (except underwear), but the air-conditioned interior would be blessed relief from her stuffy bedroom, and she could easily spend the few hours she had until her mother got off work wandering around in the mall courtyards, window shopping, or perhaps using a few dollars from what Archie had given her to play video games at the arcade.

She spent about an hour just walking around, looking in windows, occasionally venturing into the more interesting stores, and standing

in front of the large water fountain in the center of the mall. Finally, she decided she might as well get her actual shopping over with, so she headed into one of the two large department stores in the mall.

Buying underwear, a few extra pairs of socks, and a hair band (she'd let her straight black hair grow a little longer over the summer) didn't take long. She carefully tucked the bag with her purchases into her backpack, making sure the receipt stapled to the bag was on top, in case someone challenged her on the way out of the store. As she straightened up, preparing to lift her backpack off the chair in front of her, she found herself looking directly at Bonnie Seabury.

Bonnie was Brian Seabury's little sister. When Brian and Alexandra had hung out together – which they had done constantly, until last summer – Bonnie had often tagged along. Alexandra liked her well enough, but hadn't spoken to her or Brian since December. Brian and Alexandra were no longer friends.

Alexandra looked around, trying to spot Brian or his mother, since she knew Bonnie couldn't be here by herself. When she didn't see them immediately, she looked back at Bonnie, and thought about going over to say hello, and then saw what Bonnie was doing. The younger girl was standing in front of a display of clips and combs and other hair ornaments, and as Alexandra watched, Bonnie stuffed a sparkling green and silver scrunchie into her pocket, followed by a black and red satin one.

Alexandra blinked, amazed. It had always bemused her, how straight-laced the Seaburys were. In fact, it was Alexandra's own reckless disregard for rules that had contributed to the demise of her friendship with Brian. (Though a Kappa almost drowning Bonnie, for which Brian blamed Alexandra, had a lot more to do with it.) So she was shocked to see Bonnie shoplifting. She looked around again, and saw the nearest clerk was at a counter on the other side of the lingerie section, and there was still no sign of Brian or Mrs. Seabury. She glanced quickly overhead, and saw one of those black plastic bubbles in the ceiling that hid a security camera. No telling if it was pointing at Bonnie right now, but the other girl clearly hadn't noticed it, or thought about store surveillance. They were in a far corner of the department store, with tall shelves separating this section from the

women's shoe department. Racks of women's accessories separated them from the rest of the store on the other side, so it seemed like a relatively unobserved area.

Alexandra walked quickly across the aisle, between two racks of sunglasses, and tapped Bonnie on the shoulder. "What do you think you're doing?" she hissed.

Bonnie squealed and jumped almost a foot in the air, before spinning around to stare at her, red-faced. "A-A-Alex...andra?" she squeaked.

"Put them back, now!" Alexandra whispered. "Don't you know there are store cameras overhead?" And when Bonnie went white and started to look up, Alexandra hissed, "Don't look at them! Just put the scrunchies back, now! Are you crazy?"

Trembling, Bonnie reached into her pocket, and pulled out not two, but half a dozen scrunchies, and hastily put them back on the rack. Alexandra shook her head. "What were you thinking?" she demanded.

Before Bonnie could answer, Alexandra heard Brian say, "Bonnie? What are you doing?" And then Bonnie's brother came striding towards them, walking between shelves displaying women's underwear and pantyhose, looking annoyed and flustered, both at Bonnie and at where he was. "Mom's looking for you. We –" He stopped, as he saw Alexandra. "Alex?" Now he looked completely flustered.

Alexandra looked down at Bonnie. Bonnie looked back at her pleadingly.

"What are you doing here?" Brian muttered, unable to think of anything else to say.

They had been best friends, since they were old enough to walk. They'd grown up on the same street, they'd gone to school together, they'd explored Larkin Mills together. Alexandra realized, with a pang, how much she missed being friends with Brian.

But he'd turned his back on her and called her a freak. So she narrowed her eyes, and replied, "Buying underwear. What are you doing here?" She looked pointedly at the women's undergarments surrounding him, and felt a bit of satisfaction as his face turned red.

"She's buying panties!" someone said gleefully, and Alexandra turned around, to see possibly the only person she wanted to see here less than Brian: Billy Boggleston. He was with two of his friends, and she realized they must have seen her in the department store and followed her, since she couldn't imagine they'd venture into the women's wear department out of idle curiosity.

Or maybe they'd followed either Brian or Bonnie, since Billy and his friends were bullies who liked to pick on other kids. And Billy tended to avoid Alexandra. He wouldn't admit it, but she knew he was afraid of her. Indeed, at the moment, Billy was attempting to swagger confidently, while actually looking quite nervous. But he was unwilling to just walk away while accompanied by his friends.

Normally, Alexandra would have said something withering and vaguely threatening, and enjoyed watching Billy squirm, but she forgot about snappy retorts when she saw that Billy's friend Tom had picked up her book bag, which she'd left sitting on a chair.

She looked quickly in all directions, and saw there were no adults in sight.

"Maybe she's buying a bra, too!" sniggered the third boy, as if he'd suddenly thought of something enormously clever and witty. Billy and Tom both made snorting noises, and for a moment Alexandra felt nothing more than astonishment at how idiotic and juvenile they were.

Then Billy sneered, "What for?" with an exaggerated leer at her chest.

Tom started to open her bag, crowing, "Let's see what color panties she wears!" Alexandra began turning red, but not just for the reasons they thought. She was less worried about Tom pawing through her underwear purchases (which were still wrapped in plastic), than she was about him laying hands on her wand, at the bottom of the bag.

“Give me my bag,” she demanded, advancing on them angrily and speaking in a voice that was calm, quiet, and very menacing. Billy sensed the edge in her voice that conveyed more than mere embarrassment, and looked as if it was taking an effort of will not to back away from her, but Tom just laughed, and turned on his heel. Alexandra realized with dismay that he was about to take off – probably he'd make a run for the exit, carrying her book bag with him, and she'd have to chase him all over the mall unless she were lucky enough to persuade an adult to intercept him.

Then the female store mannequin behind him reached down and caught his wrist.

Tom started, looked up to see who'd grabbed him, and then his jaw dropped. He opened his hand and dropped Alexandra's book bag immediately. Billy and his other friend looked as if they might wet their pants.

“Ow!” whimpered Tom. Alexandra thought he was about to cry.

The plastic mannequin, clad only in a lacy thong and matching brassiere, raised its other hand, held up one finger, and slowly and deliberately waggled it in front of the terrified boy's face, shaking its head. Then it released him. Tom took one step backward, grabbing his bruised wrist with his other hand. All three boys stared at the mannequin as if expecting it to step off its stand and come after them, but it merely returned to its previous pose and became rigid and motionless again. Then they turned and ran.

Alexandra dashed over to where her book bag had fallen, keeping her eyes on the mannequin at all times as she stooped to pick it up. It didn't move. Then she turned around, to see Brian and Bonnie both staring at her and the mannequin behind her, wide-eyed.

She took a breath. “Brian... Bonnie...” She stepped towards them, and Brian backed away, pulling his sister with him. “I swear, I didn't do that!” she said.

"Right," Brian gulped. He swallowed as he continued backing away from her. His face was white. "It's totally normal for store dummies to move by themselves."

Alexandra shook her head. She met Bonnie's eyes, then Brian's again. "I can't even do that!" she protested.

"Like it matters?" Brian shouted. "Stuff like this always happens around you! Stay away from us, okay?"

Bonnie, though scared, didn't have the same angry, horrified look as Brian, but she didn't resist as her brother took her by the hand and dragged her away. She glanced over her shoulder at Alexandra as they left. Brian didn't look back.

Alexandra was thinking that Brian's expression, for a moment, had reminded her of the Bible School teacher who'd told them Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live, when someone behind her asked, "Is there a problem, young lady?" She turned around, to see that the store clerk had finally heard the commotion and made her way over to this section. She was now looking down at the preteen suspiciously.

Alexandra started to stammer something, and then another voice asked, "Yes, is there a problem, Alexandra?"

The saleswoman turned around, and so didn't notice Alexandra's gasp when she saw the tall, imposing woman who had just appeared. With her straight black hair, much longer than Alexandra's, and her high, chiseled cheekbones and sharp nose, she had a striking profile, and her presence was such that the clerk actually took a step back, unconsciously.

"We'd prefer that you not leave your daughter unattended in the store, ma'am," stammered the clerk. "We've had some problems with unsupervised children lately."

"She's not my daughter," said the other woman. "But we were just leaving. Weren't we, Alexandra?"

Alexandra was still staring at her, until the clerk turned around, and then Alexandra managed to nod. “Yes, Ms. Grimm,” she mumbled.

The Special Inquisitor

Alexandra followed Ms. Grimm to the exit, in a state of agitation and confusion. They were delayed briefly at the main entrance that opened back into the mall, when a security guard demanded to check Alexandra's backpack. She wordlessly handed it over, feeling a bit nervous as the man pulled her shopping bag out of it and checked the receipt. He gave a quick glance inside, but if he saw the wand, he must not have thought it interesting, because he shoved the bag back into her pack and returned it to her with a perfunctory smile. "Have a nice day," he said.

Ms. Grimm waited for Alexandra to speak first. Alexandra waited until they were outside and surrounded by mall shoppers, before asking, "Why did you do that?"

Grimm's eyes twinkled. "To make the young man let go of your bag, of course."

Surprised, and not at all amused, Alexandra asked, "What happened to the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy?"

"Were you thinking about that the other day, when you poisoned a dozen children?"

Alexandra frowned. "I didn't poison them, and it was an accident."

The tall woman shook her head. "Careless, Miss Quick, very careless. Like leaving your wand out of reach, particularly when you're out in public. Do you know what a disaster it might have been if that Muggle boy had actually laid hands on it and started waving it around?"

The lecture only annoyed Alexandra more. "If you saw what was going on, you could have just walked over and made him give it back," she pointed out accusingly. "You're an adult."

"But you must admit, they're more likely to leave you alone in the future." Ms. Grimm seemed to find the entire thing very amusing.

Alexandra didn't like the woman's smirk at all. "Right, now they think I'm even more of a freak than they already do!" She scowled. "So am I in trouble?"

Grimm gave a little shrug. "What's important is that the existence of our world isn't exposed to Muggles. Do you suppose any of those children are going to tell their parents what happened? And if they did, would they be believed?"

Suspicion was gnawing at Alexandra now. Such a cavalier attitude wasn't like Ms. Grimm at all. And this woman didn't seem like Ms. Grimm in other ways. She was wearing jeans, for one. Alexandra had never seen Lilith Grimm wearing jeans. The Dean of Charmbridge Academy was often dressed in clothing that would pass for Muggle wear, but it was always stylish and professional-looking; suits or dresses or business-like skirts and blouses. Until now, Alexandra would have bet that Ms. Grimm didn't even own a pair of jeans.

It wasn't just that, though. There was something off about her that Alexandra couldn't quite put her finger on. Ms. Grimm stared down at her, with a small smile, as if waiting for Alexandra to figure it out, and she did, at last.

"You're not Ms. Grimm."

The woman looked amused. "Of course I am."

Alexandra's eyes narrowed. "You're Diana Grimm," she said slowly.

She had first seen that name on a Wizard Justice Department memo written twelve years ago. Just after Alexandra was born, Claudia Quick had been interrogated as to the whereabouts of the father of her child, and then Obliviated. And the Wizard Justice Department agent whose signature was on that memo was Diana Grimm: Lilith Grimm's sister.

Diana Grimm nodded, still smiling, like a teacher pleased at a student's answer.

"Dean Grimm didn't tell me you were twins."

Grimm's smile widened. "Well, why should she?" She looked around. "It's lunchtime. Why don't we get something to eat? My treat."

Alexandra still had a lunch packed in her book bag, but suspected that Diana Grimm intended to talk to her one way or the other. She thought she might as well get a burger and fries out of it, so she followed the older witch to an indoor diner. They took a booth in the corner that had a view of the mall's upper and lower levels, through a grease-smeared window. She studied the woman across the table warily. Grimm did look exactly like her sister. She had the same regal, handsome face, the same penetrating gaze, the same haughty demeanor and slightly condescending tone. Diana Grimm seemed less uptight, though, and she appeared perfectly comfortable in a Muggle environment.

Neither of them spoke until after the waitress had brought them drinks. Finally, Ms. Grimm said, "I suppose you know that I was the one who interviewed your mother, when you were a baby."

"I'm sure your sister told you everything I know." Alexandra's tone was sharp and not a little resentful, but Ms. Grimm merely smiled.

"Lilith told me what she was obligated to tell me." The Dean's sister seemed to be choosing her words carefully. "She doesn't work for the Wizard Justice Department, and she wasn't at all happy about our interfering with her running of her school last year."

Alexandra snorted.

"Your mother wasn't harmed, you know," Grimm went on. "In fact, by our watching over her, and you, you've both been protected."

"From what?" Alexandra demanded. She looked around and lowered her voice. "You're only trying to find my father; you don't care about us. Do you think my father would hurt us?"

"Abraham Thorn is a dangerous and ruthless man. He wouldn't hesitate to use you if it served his purposes."

“Really?” Alexandra's tone was flat. “And how does that make him different from you?”

The Wizard Justice Department agent gave Alexandra a long look, as if searching her face for bits of information she hadn't revealed yet. She slowly swirled her straw through the ice cubes in her glass of diet soda.

“The difference,” she said at last, “is that we represent the forces of law and order. We keep the peace. Your father rejects rules and laws, and follows only his own ambition. He wouldn't hesitate to tear wizarding society apart.”

Alexandra was silent for a moment, then shrugged. “I still don't know where he is.”

“And you've had no contact with him at all?” Grimm asked, a little too casually.

The waitress returned with their plates of food, giving Alexandra a few moments to think while her hamburger and fries were set in front of her.

“Like I told the Governor-General,” Alexandra answered, once the waitress had laid their bill on the table and left, “I've never even met my father.” She picked up some fries and put them in her mouth.

“And he's still made no attempt to contact you?” Grimm repeated, leaning forward a little, to stare unnervingly at her.

“No.” Alexandra lied shamelessly, meeting the other woman's eyes without blinking. She still didn't know how she felt about Abraham Thorn, but she had no intention of telling this agent of the Confederation about the letter her father's raven had delivered to her at the beginning of summer. She'd read it and then promptly torn it into tiny shreds.

Ms. Grimm stared at her a moment longer, then nodded and leaned back in her seat, and began eating her club sandwich.

"So, I'm not your only 'case,' am I?" Alexandra asked. "Or don't you have anything better to do than spy on me? Is the Wizard Justice Department going to have someone watching me at school again this year?"

"Well, I certainly hope no more of your father's associates will be trying to kill you," Ms. Grimm replied. "But we will be relying primarily on my sister to keep an eye on you. To answer your question, yes, I do have other cases, but for the last twelve years, Abraham Thorn and his Circle have been my top priority." Her tone softened. "I am sorry you're caught up in this, Alexandra. I realize it's not your fault. But you can blame your father for this unwanted interference in your life." She finished her sandwich and began chasing it down with a bowl of soup, while Alexandra bit into her hamburger.

"If nothing's happened in twelve years," Alexandra grumbled, talking around a mouthful of hamburger bun, "then why are you still chasing him? He hasn't done anything. Maybe he just wants to be left alone?"

Grimm's eyes narrowed, and she gave Alexandra a thin smile.

"We are quite sure that Abraham Thorn is not merely settled into retirement somewhere. And even if he were, it doesn't erase his past crimes. You don't try to assassinate the Governor-General of the Confederation and then walk away from that and expect to be left alone. Life isn't like that, Alexandra, and you're old enough to realize that."

Alexandra frowned, and continued eating her burger.

Ms. Grimm finished her soup, and watched Alexandra eat, her chin resting on her hands. "Did you keep the card that the Governor-General gave you?" she asked lightly.

Alexandra suspected that Ms. Grimm knew she hadn't. It was some kind of magical business card she was supposed to use to contact the Governor-General, or his henchman, Mr. Raspire, if her father contacted her. She had set it on fire before she even left Charmbridge Academy. Now she wondered if it had been charmed to

tell them where she was, and possibly let them know if she destroyed it or threw it away.

"I lost it," she mumbled. She feared she sounded a little less convincing than before.

If Ms. Grimm realized Alexandra was lying, she didn't show it. She just smiled and slid another card across the table. "Here's mine. I hope you won't lose it."

Like the card the Governor-General had given her, it was just a stiff white slip of heavy paper with the Seal of the Confederation next to the Wizard Justice Department seal, and below that:

Office of Special Inquisitions

Diana Aleto Grimm, Special Inquisitor

Alexandra didn't touch it. Ms. Grimm merely smiled and waited, while Alexandra finished her hamburger. She picked up the bill, and began picking at it, tearing little pieces off with her long fingernails.

"It's all right to have questions, you know," said the Inquisitor. "And I realize Lilith wasn't exactly forthcoming, when you came to Charmbridge Academy. She was trying to protect you, I suppose, but I think you should have simply been told everything from the beginning. That's how I would have handled it."

Alexandra nodded, wondering if this was an effort to get on her good side. Maybe Diana Grimm was trying to seem more sympathetic than her sister.

"Dean Grimm said there was still a lot of stuff she wasn't telling me," Alexandra said slowly, watching her.

Ms. Grimm smiled, as she continued picking apart the restaurant bill, turning it over and over and absently tearing off little shreds from one edge, then the next. "I'm sure that's true. Though I doubt she was referring to any secrets about your father. If she knew more about that, she would have told me, I assure you."

"Like my mother. Who you had Obliviated!" Alexandra blurted out the accusation, but Grimm looked unperturbed. She merely continued picking at the ever-shrinking green and white carbon paper slip that had been their bill. Pick, pick, pick. Alexandra's eyes were drawn to the little scraps piling up on the table in front of her.

"Not I," Grimm replied softly. "It wasn't my decision. But don't you think she's better off not knowing?"

"Not knowing what? That her – that the man she – well, who's my father, is a wizard? That I'm a witch?" Alexandra scowled fiercely.

Grimm's gray eyes, so much like her sister's, regarded Alexandra, but there was sympathy there, something Alexandra rarely saw from the Dean. "I see," she said quietly. "It must be very difficult, living among Muggles, and not being able to talk about the wizarding world. And your mother can't give you any answers." She nodded. "I understand, Alexandra, I really do. That must be very hard for you, and you're at the age where you need to talk about these things. I can't tell you what to do about your mother, but from my observations, she and your stepfather have taken good care of you, and haven't exactly stifled you. Maybe you should consider talking to your mother, about everything. Including your father."

Alexandra found herself nodding along, for a moment. All her previous efforts to extract information about her father from her mother had hit a brick wall; her mother simply refused to discuss it. But that had been before Alexandra found out she was a witch, and then learned who her father was. Maybe she should just tell her mother everything, and make her deal with it. And then get the answers she wanted –

Her eyes narrowed, and her hands clenched into fists. "And then tell you anything she tells me, I suppose?" There was an angry tremor in her voice. That's what this was about, she realized. Just another way to use her to get to her father!

Grimm shook her head. "Alexandra, we already know everything your mother knows, remember? Really, you should stop assuming there's a hidden motive behind everything I say."

"Right, you just followed me into a department store and then took me out to lunch 'cause you thought I might like to chat," Alexandra replied coldly. "It has nothing to do with me being the Secret-Keeper for the Thorn Circle."

Grimm sighed. "Of course it has a great deal to do with your father making you his Secret-Keeper as an infant. I don't blame you for your hostility, Alexandra. I regret it, but I don't blame you. Believe me, interrogating new mothers and twelve-year-old girls isn't my favorite part of the job. But I do have a job. You'll be seeing me again, I expect. We can at least try not to make it more unpleasant than it has to be, can't we?"

Alexandra shrugged noncommittally. Grimm tapped the card she'd left on the table, nudging it a little closer to the girl. Alexandra took it, sticking it in her pocket without looking at it again, and then glanced at the tiny shredded remains of their bill, and snorted.

"You're supposed to pay that, you know. The waitress will need it to ring you up." She spoke as if lecturing someone ignorant of Muggle ways, though she was pretty sure that Ms. Grimm was not.

"Ah, yes," replied the other witch. She sighed, brushing off a few scraps of paper still clinging to her fingertips, and then looked around, to make sure they were unobserved, before drawing a wand. Alexandra didn't see exactly where she'd been keeping it. "A bad habit of mine – I tend to be restless." She held the wand over the pile of scraps, and murmured, "Recolligo."

The tiny shreds of paper abruptly flattened against the table, slid into place like a little jigsaw puzzle assembling itself, and then the bill lay on the table, whole again.

Alexandra stared at it.

“A very useful spell,” Grimm observed mildly. “You’ll probably learn it this year at school.” She tucked her wand back into her shirt somewhere, and pulled out a wallet, from which she withdrew a couple of bills. She laid them on the table. “Well, I have to run – I do have other ‘cases,’ as you put it – but this will cover the bill, and a tip, and a sundae for you, so feel free to stay and have dessert. Until next time, Alexandra.”

Diana Grimm rose from the table, and sauntered out of the diner, leaving Alexandra still staring at the reassembled bill, her mouth dry. She didn’t feel like having a sundae.

Stormcrows

Alexandra didn't get another opportunity to leave the apartment until the following week, when the Charmbridge bus came to take her to the Goblin Market. Her mother actually waited with her in the parking lot that morning; bleary-eyed, still wearing a bathrobe, and drinking a cup of coffee. Alexandra had heard her parents arguing again the previous night; her mother wanted to move back to Sweetmaple Avenue, but Archie thought it would be too expensive. This argument had been going on all summer.

"I'm surprised they don't send a larger bus," her mother murmured, as the short yellow school bus with 'Charmbridge Academy' printed on its sides pulled into the parking lot.

Actually, it's a magic school bus, and it's the size of double-decker inside, Alexandra thought, and she almost said it out loud. She wondered if her mother would choke on her coffee if she did.

Tabitha Speaks, the Charmbridge bus driver, opened the door to the bus and smiled at Alexandra and her mother. "Good morning, Miss Quick! Hello, Mrs. Green. How has your summer been?"

"Great," Alexandra replied, while thinking, Horrible.

"Hot," replied her mother. She smiled tiredly at Mrs. Speaks. "So, you'll be returning around six, right?"

"That's right, Mrs. Green. Hop aboard, dear."

Alexandra turned to her mother. "See you later."

Her mother patted her on the shoulder. "Behave yourself. Don't spend all the money Archie gave you if you don't have to." Alexandra nodded, and boarded the bus.

As soon as she stepped inside, the true dimensions of the bus's interior became apparent: it stretched far beyond its exterior length, and to the rear, there were stairs to a second level, where the high school-age students sat. Instead of normal bus seats all facing

forward, there were rows of comfortable booths on either side of the center aisle, with tables, so students could sit together facing each other. Towards the front of the bus were eighth and ninth graders. Alexandra walked past students wearing everything from suspenders and bow-ties to leather vests and buckskin breeches. Some girls wore old-fashioned prairie dresses, others wore long witches' robes and pointed hats. She saw one boy in a formal jacket and dress white shirt, with a high-collared black cloak wrapped around him as he sat on the bus seat, looking like a small blond Dracula. Across from him, a ninth grade girl was wearing a stiff corset and puffy skirts that barely fit under their table. There were Old Colonials, New Colonials, Radicalists, and members of Druidic Orders, but as usual, Alexandra saw only a handful of kids like her who dressed like Muggles.

She gave a tight smile to a pair of eighth grade boys, Stuart Cortlandt and Torvald Krogstad, who were engaged in their usual pastime of trying to hex each other without being caught by Mrs. Speaks or the senior chaperones. They both grinned at her, and Torvald called out, "Hey, Troublesome!"

The nickname she'd earned last year generated snickers and stares from the older kids. The Rash twins, a pair of Ozarker boys in denim trousers and long-sleeved shirts, looked at her as if she were tracking dog poop down the aisle. She saw Larry Albo, a boy two years older than her who'd been her nemesis all last year, sitting with his friends Ethan Robinson and Wade White. Larry just gave her a little sneer, then turned his attention back to his friends, and Alexandra likewise passed him by without comment.

Her fellow seventh graders were towards the rear. Here, she found five girls already sitting in one booth, and her face broke into a smile.

"Alex!" squealed a small Chinese girl. Anna Chu jumped out of her seat and embraced her roommate.

"Hi, Anna. How've you been?" Alexandra hugged her back, embarrassed but happy. She couldn't help noticing that she'd gained at least an inch on the smaller girl over the summer.

Two girls who looked like mirror images of one another, with pale blue eyes, identical Ozarker dresses, and blonde hair tucked beneath old-fashioned bonnets, smiled at her and said in unison, "Hello, Alexandra."

"Did you have a good summer?" asked Constance Pritchard.

"We missed you terrible," said Forbearance Pritchard.

Alexandra grinned at the twins. "I missed you too, all of you."

Even you two, she thought, looking at the last two girls, one of them pale-skinned, with round cheeks and wavy black hair, and the other dark-skinned, with her sleek black hair tied in a knot on top of her head. Both of them were prettier and much more elegantly dressed than anyone else at the table. "Hi Darla, Angelique."

Darla Dearborn and Angelique Devereaux smiled at her. "Welcome to the seventh grade," said Darla officiously.

"What did you do this summer?" asked Angelique.

Alexandra slid into the booth next to Anna, across from Darla and Angelique. "Not much."

"My family and I went to the North Pole on an Aurora Borealis cruise," sighed Darla, barely waiting for Alexandra's reply. "It was so romantic! I met the most wonderful boy on the cruise, he goes to the Blacksburg Magery Institute, and he's four years older than me —"

"And she hasn't stopped talking about him since." Angelique sounded a bit exasperated. "Really, what's a junior doing dallying with a seventh grader?"

"He wasn't dallying with me," Darla huffed, looking offended. "We had a lot of long, interesting conversations! And there's nothing wrong with an older boy recognizing that some girls are more sophisticated and mature than other girls her age!" She turned up her nose haughtily.

"What's that got to do with you?" Alexandra snorted. Angelique and Anna burst out laughing, and the Pritchards looked down to hide their smiles.

"I went to summer school at Baleswood," Angelique volunteered, filling the gap before Darla could sputter an indignant comeback. "I learned a lot of spells Charmbridge doesn't teach in the seventh grade."

"Like curses, you mean?" muttered Darla.

Angelique frowned and shook her head. "Dark Arts are prohibited at Baleswood, just like everywhere else. I did learn some counter-curses, though."

"Aren't counter-curses just curses you throw back at people who cursed you first?" asked Anna.

"No!" Angelique protested.

The Pritchards, as usual, were sitting quietly and listening to everyone else talk, much too modest to interrupt. But they smiled when Alexandra asked about their summer.

"Well, we pitched in on chores, 'course," began Constance.

"There was doxies and anger-nettles to slay, and gnomins to do," Forbearance continued.

"And we two chased off a Nogtail all ourselves!" Constance declared proudly.

"One of our older brothers usually would'a done it, but we spied it in our pens..." said Forbearance, and both girls drew their wands as Constance finished, "...and gave it a spellin' and a hexin' that sent it squealing into the next holler!" The two girls made identical, dramatic slashes with their wands to demonstrate.

Alexandra didn't even know what a Nogtail was, but she grinned appreciatively. "Awesome!"

The Pritchards smiled bashfully, until Darla sniffed, "So you spent the summer getting rid of magical pests? That doesn't sound like much fun."

Alexandra rolled her eyes at her, but Constance replied, "We wasn't just clearin' out varmints."

Forbearance shook her head, then leaned forward, and added in a low voice, "We went with the Grannies to take cuttings."

"Black oak and white oak," whispered Constance.

"They didn't let us cut none, 'course," said Forbearance.

"But we got to watch how they done it."

"Great-Grandma says if we'all is patient and got the knack, maybe we might become cutters ourselves someday."

"What's a cutter?" Alexandra asked, baffled.

"It's part of wandcraft," Anna murmured. "That's really advanced magic."

"Difficult, too," remarked Angelique.

"I've heard you have to be a little crazy to be any good," said Darla, almost dismissively. "You'd have to be, to spend weeks just crafting one wand."

The Pritchards gave Darla a look that was almost, but not quite, a glare.

"Our Great-Grandma is a cutter and a crafter," Constance informed her.

"She hain't skilt as her ma," Forbearance added.

"Great-Great Grandma was one of the finest ever there was," Constance agreed.

"But Great-Grandma was a'feared it'd be lost in our family, 'til now," said Forbearance.

"Grandma and Ma weren't no good at it, and our two eldest sisters hain't got the knack neither."

"But she thinks we might."

"Wow." Anna sounded impressed. "All I studied this summer was magic ideograms and old scrolls." She sighed. "It was boring."

Alexandra slumped a little in her seat. She felt envious. All of the other girls got to learn magic over the summer, or at least do something cool, like go on a cruise to the North Pole. Who in Larkin Mills wouldn't be awed by that? She had no desire to even try to explain the concept of Vacation Bible School to her friends.

She was quiet for a while, as Anna talked about ideograms, Angelique described Baleswood (which Alexandra gathered was deep in an alligator-infested swamp somewhere), and Darla turned the conversation as often as she could back to her Aurora Borealis cruise and her handsome boy from Blacksburg. With each retelling, their moonlit walks became longer, and their conversations became deeper and more meaningful, until by the time the bus came to a stop again, Alexandra half-expected Darla to announce that she was engaged to be married.

They looked out the windows, and saw a large, industrial city which was not Chicago. Distance wasn't the same on the Automagicka as on Muggle highways, so Alexandra guessed they were in Detroit. This was confirmed a moment later when David Washington came walking down the center aisle, nodding and waving to a few of the kids he recognized. Then his face lit up as he saw Alexandra and the other girls.

"Hey," he greeted them cheerfully. "Just like last year."

"You mean you want to sit at a table full of girls again?" Angelique asked. "Won't the boys put up with you?"

David's grin faltered, but then Angelique winked, and Alexandra snorted.

"Don't mind them none, David," Constance chided. "'Course you can sit with us."

The Muggle-born boy hesitated, then slid into the booth next to Alexandra, across the table from Angelique.

"Yeah, tell us about your summer." Alexandra scooted over, glad that at least one other person at the table had been trapped in the non-magical Muggle world.

"My folks made me enroll in summer school, 'cause they thought I wasn't learning enough math and science and English at Charmbridge," David grumbled. "So now I have a bunch of independent study guides I'm supposed to be working on in my spare time while I'm at school. Like my parents think all I have time for is studying." He rolled his eyes, then looked around the table. "So what's up with all of you?"

"Darla's been telling us about her boyfriend," Angelique drawled.

"It's very romantic." Alexandra nodded. "I'm sure she'll invite you to the wedding."

"Very funny!" Darla snapped, as David looked confused and the other girls laughed. "You're all so immature!"

That earned Darla more teasing, as Angelique and Alexandra both began imitating Darla, batting their lashes and waxing rhapsodical about handsome boys and moonlit walks, in nauseatingly syrupy voices. Anna was turning red from laughing so hard, and even Constance and Forbearance couldn't help giggling. Finally, they took pity on Darla, and changed the subject. Darla, by now, was fanning her face and flushing furiously.

“What electives are you going to take?” Alexandra asked the others curiously. Seventh graders got to choose one elective, and she still hadn't decided on hers.

David answered first. “P.M.E. for me. I'm hoping to get on the Quidditch team.”

“I'm taking Introduction to Astronomy and Astrology,” said Darla. “It's a prerequisite for Divination.”

“You want to be a fortune teller?” David asked.

“Divination isn't fortune telling,” Darla retorted, with another disdainful look. “Honestly, David, you're such a Muggle sometimes!” David just smirked.

Angelique's forehead wrinkled. “My parents want me to take something useful, like Arithmancy or Geomancy.” She didn't sound enthusiastic. “I'd rather just take Practical Magical Exercise, though, or something else easy. Maybe I'll take Astronomy and Astrology with Darla.” Darla didn't look flattered.

“What about you two?” Alexandra asked the Pritchards.

“We chose Muggle Studies,” they replied together.

Everyone raised their eyebrows at that. “Muggle Studies?” Darla repeated.

“Why would y'all be interested in Muggles?” asked Angelique. “Er, no offense,” she added, with an apologetic look at Anna, Alexandra, and David, all of whom had Muggle parents, and all of whom were now glaring at her.

“We thought witches oughter know more about 'em,” replied Constance.

“And we felt plumb ignorant last year in Chicago,” Forbearance admitted.

“Well, most of the sixth graders on that field trip were plumb ignorant,” Alexandra commented, earning her a grin from David, a small smile from Anna, and glares from Darla and Angelique.

“But if you want to know about Muggles, why don't you just ask me and Alex?” asked David. “We can tell you anything you want to know.”

“Really?” asked Constance, eyebrows raised. “Well then, what kind of critter is a hot dog?”

“And where do they raise 'em?” asked Forbearance.

“How do Muggles get skyscrapers to stand up without magic?” Constance asked.

“Why do they leave their electricity lights on all the time?” asked Forbearance.

“Don't they get cold dressed half-nekkid in the winter?”

“If they gots more than one airplane flying over a city, how do they keep 'em from crashin'?”

“How do they protect themselves 'gainst sorcery?”

Alexandra and David stared at the two Ozarkers, and then just shook their heads.

“All right,” David conceded, “maybe you should take Muggle Studies if you want to know all that.”

“Maybe you oughter take Muggle Studies if you don't know all that,” suggested Constance.

David snorted, and then took out a cell phone. “Check it out,” he boasted, as he flipped the case open. “Bet you won't get to use these in your Muggle Studies class.”

Everyone, especially the Pritchards, found David's phone fascinating, but Anna was the first to point out: "It won't work here, or at school."

"I know." David nodded, pushing buttons on the phone with his thumb, and frowning. "But I want to figure out why. Everyone says magic and Muggle technology don't mix. You ever wonder how many wizards have even bothered to try?"

"I'm sure you're not the first to think of it," Anna said.

David grinned. "Maybe I'll be the first to figure out how to do it."

His attempts to do anything with his cell phone on the bus were unsuccessful, though. Alexandra was secretly pleased, even though she knew it was petty. She was quite envious of David's cell phone, which looked like a pretty expensive model.

They continued talking about their classes and electives, then about the nervous-looking sixth graders in the back of the bus, all the way to Chicago. Alexandra still didn't know which elective she intended to choose, and she knew she had to decide because they were supposed to buy textbooks that day.

She was still thinking about it when they reached a run-down neighborhood in downtown Chicago, where Mrs. Speaks parked the bus and ushered all of the students out. They stood lined up in the parking lot in front of Grobnowski's Old World Deli, while Mrs. Speaks gave them the same speech as last year: sixth, seventh, and eighth graders had to stay with their chaperones, while ninth graders and above were permitted to do their shopping on their own, and everyone had to be back in front of Grobnowski's by four o'clock.

The chaperone for the seventh graders was a senior boy named Vance Wilson, who looked bored and barely spoke to the younger students at all. Everyone filed into the Polish deli, past the cases displaying both Muggle and 'wizard-raised' meats, and Muggle and wizard cheeses, and through the door in the back that opened into the Goblin Market.

As they stepped out into the wizard shopping district, Alexandra was once again dazzled by the magic, the enchanted storefronts, the flying, bouncing, jingling, flashing, charmed trinkets, and the variety of outfits worn on the street. An extremely large, round witch drifted past wrapped in a multilayered robe that shimmered in an ever-changing kaleidoscope of colors. A thin, dour wizard wearing a coarse black wool cassock scowled darkly at the children as he passed by. A wizard in a red and black uniform rode past on a gray winged horse, earning admiring “oohs” and “ahs” from the students. Alexandra saw a couple of house-elves tagging after some of the more richly-dressed wizards and witches, and she thought there were a few more Clockwork golems in storefronts than last year.

“Vance.” She spoke up reluctantly. The older boy had his hands stuck in his pockets, and was watching the nearby sixth graders as they stared, open-mouthed. Alexandra guessed some of them were Muggle-born, too, or perhaps were like the Pritchards, who had never seen the big city before they came to Charmbridge Academy. Vance blinked and looked down at her, annoyed.

“I only have Muggle money,” Alexandra told him. “I need to exchange it.”

He frowned. “You're Quick, aren't you?” And then, before she could answer, he said, “Aren't you on a scholarship? What do you need money for?”

“For stuff that my scholarship doesn't cover,” she replied stubbornly. Last year she hadn't been able to buy much of anything other than what was on her required list of supplies. She still had money left from what Archie had given her the previous week, though, and this time she intended to pick up a few extra books and things.

Vance sighed. “Fine, any other Muggle-borns who need to go to the bank?” he demanded, looking at the other seventh graders. No one raised their hands. Alexandra looked at David, who shrugged. His parents, she knew, had probably sent a check and received wizard money in exchange already. She envied him his wizarding world-aware parents.

"Follow me," Vance ordered, and set off down the street, forcing all of the younger kids to hurry to match his long strides, and giving them no opportunity to pause and window shop. They passed a new broom store, which was probably doomed to go out of business soon, with the huge Chicago Broom Megastore down the street, and a boutique with 'This Season's Potions and Notions for the Stylish Society Witch.' Darla and Angelique both slowed to a halt in front of the boutique, then sighed as they sped to catch up with the other kids.

"CBNW or Gringotts?" asked Vance.

"What's the difference?" Alexandra asked. She'd never actually been in one of the wizard banks before.

"Gringotts is run by goblins. CBNW isn't," Vance explained impatiently.

Alexandra thought she'd like to see goblins, so she said, "Gringotts."

She had only ever seen Gringotts from the outside. It was one of the larger buildings in the Goblin Market, with white marble columns at the top of its marble steps. All of its exterior signs were carved in stone.

"Behave yourselves," Vance warned all of them. "Goblins don't like children."

Everyone looked a bit nervous at this, though Alexandra suspected Vance was just making that up. When they entered the high-ceilinged lobby of the bank, though, they saw that the counters towered over the human customers inside, and peering down at them from above were small, dark-skinned creatures with long, pointed ears, prominent noses, and disapproving expressions. Some of the goblin tellers seemed to be baring their teeth as the seventh graders walked in. But the goblins who were engaged in transactions with adult wizards didn't really look any friendlier.

"Go on," said Vance, giving Alexandra a push forward, so she stood in line by herself, occasionally glancing back at the other seventh graders. Most were looking around curiously. Constance and

Forbearance seemed nervous, and Darla and Angelique just looked impatient.

At the front of the line, Alexandra had to crane her neck up to see the goblin leaning over the counter to stare down at her.

"Well?" demanded the goblin.

"I need to exchange Muggle money for wizard money," she said.

"Do you have an account with us?" the goblin snapped.

"No."

"Well, then you'll have to pay a surcharge."

Alexandra frowned. "What if I open an account?"

The goblin wrinkled his nose, studying her. "How much Muggle money do you have?" he inquired.

She pulled out her bills, and counted them. "Umm, seventy-six dollars."

The goblin grimaced, and showed teeth as he spoke, very slowly. "We are not a piggy bank, little girl!"

Alexandra could see why Gringotts didn't leave out any cards inviting patrons to comment on its customer service, like she'd seen at Muggle banks.

She left with two Lions, six Eagles, and two Pigeons, and a vague suspicion that she'd been cheated, though since she didn't really know what the exchange rate was, she couldn't be sure. Still, she liked jingling the gold coins in her hand.

"Finished?" asked Vance, in a dry, sarcastic tone, which Alexandra thought was completely unnecessary, since she obviously was. She just nodded, and he gestured and led everyone back out onto the street.

They didn't have as much shopping to do this year, as everyone already had wands, and most of the seventh graders had familiars, as well as other essential supplies like cauldrons and gloves. They did stop at Hoargrim's Wands and Alchemical Supplies to get the potion and alchemy supplies they'd need for the coming year. Then it was Boxley's Books, where they bought their textbooks. They all bought their required books from the 'Young Wands' teaching series, but this time Alexandra added the book about magical beasts she hadn't been able to buy the year before. She also felt quite smug when she added a book of hexes and jinxes to her stack, and walked out of the store with it. Their chaperone last year had been more officious, but Vance wasn't even paying attention to what the kids were buying.

Alexandra noticed that Constance and Forbearance had only purchased one Muggle Studies textbook between them (Why Do Muggles Do That? An Introduction to the Fascinating World of Muggles for Young Wizards and Witches), and like last year, most of the books they bought came from the 'used' shelf. Darla had her Astronomy and Astrology textbook, and was complaining about its thickness, and the fact that it seemed to contain a lot of information about memorizing heavenly bodies and their positions and movements, and not very much about how to read your love life in the stars.

Alexandra looked down at the armful of books Anna was carrying.

"Geomancy?" she asked.

Anna shrugged. "My father wanted me to take that or Arithmancy."

"What do you want to take?" Alexandra asked.

"P.M.E., if I had a choice." Anna shrugged again. "What are you taking?"

"I don't know."

The other girl frowned at her. "Well, if you don't buy any textbooks, you'll have no choice but to take P.M.E., or else use a borrowed book."

"Whatever," Alexandra said. This was a useful expression she'd learned this summer (it was, in fact, the expression that had gotten her grounded in July, when directed insolently at her stepfather), and she didn't want to admit to being indecisive, when usually she was anything but.

Darla and Angelique begged Vance to let them stop at a designer clothing store with fancy, frilly, formal robes in the front window.

"You won't be going to any balls in the seventh grade," Vance told them.

"But they have Clytemnestra Kirk!" pleaded Darla.

"And Jean Tuckahoe!" Angelique said breathlessly.

At the older boy's blank look, Darla and Angelique tried to give him a quick lesson on the year's hottest designers. He rapidly lost patience.

"You want formal robes, buy them at Grundy's," he growled.

Darla and Angelique looked as if Vance had suggested they dress like house-elves, but he was unmoved. The two girls were sulking and fuming all the way to Grundy's.

"Do you actually have the money for a Clytemnestra Kirk original?" asked Anna.

Darla and Angelique both looked reluctant to admit that they did not, but Darla complained, "We can look!"

Alexandra and Anna rolled their eyes together.

Grundy's Department Store was the largest building in the Goblin Market. Alexandra had found every floor fascinating last year; they sold everything from clothing to brooms to potion supplies to

Clockwork golems. They even had a wand department, though it was said that only those who couldn't afford better (or who were too magically inept for it to make a difference) bought their wands at Grundy's.

Vance led the way through the large double-doors into the department store. A pair of shiny gold mechanical men (wearing magnets on their chests that said, "Get service like this at home, too! Tockmagi® Clockwork Golems") opened the doors for them. As soon as Alexandra and Anna stepped across the threshold, they collided with an invisible barrier, and stumbled backwards. Anna yelped in pain and rubbed her nose, and Alexandra was about to do the same – it felt like she'd walked face-first into a wall. Then she heard howls of laughter from just inside, and saw Larry, Ethan, and Wade all standing in the entrance foyer of the store, doubling over and pointing with glee.

"I told you!" Larry snickered to his friends.

"Bright as gnomes!" Ethan sneered.

"Hey, Troublesome, why don't you run at it really fast?" suggested Wade. "That's how Larry got in!" All the boys began laughing harder at that.

"What the heckfire was that?" demanded Vance, looking at the two girls, annoyed, and then he turned to glare at the ninth grade boys. "And what are you three doing?"

Larry and his friends stood up and tried to reply to the older boy with straight faces.

"Looks like Troublesome and her friends forgot they've been Barred," said Larry.

Alexandra gritted her teeth, while behind her, David groaned. All of them had been kicked out of Grundy's last year, following a brawl with Larry and the Rash twins. Alexandra hadn't realized that when they said she'd been barred from Grundy's, they meant magically.

She glared at Larry. "He was Barred, too!" she said to Vance, pointing at the other boy accusingly.

"How'd you get in?" Vance demanded.

Larry smirked, but answered, "Got a manager to let me in. They'll undo the Bar, if you promise to behave." He grinned triumphantly at Alexandra, before he and Ethan and Wade walked away.

Vance turned and scowled at Alexandra. "You were Barred?"

Why is he only looking at me? Alexandra thought resentfully, as she muttered, "It was last year."

"We'll fetch the manager for you, Vance," offered Darla. Angelique nodded.

"Fine." Vance waved them through the door, and Darla and Angelique both giggled and looked a little smug as they dashed inside.

"Don't you never mind those boys, Alexandra," said Forbearance, while Vance paced around and muttered, "Troublesome," under his breath.

David offered an apologetic grin. "Thanks for walking through first." Alexandra and Anna glared at him, unamused.

"You oughter be grateful, David Washington," scolded Constance.

"Considerin' you was the one who started that ruckus last year," Forbearance pointed out.

"Actually, it was your boys who called me a Mudblood first," David retorted.

Constance looked offended. "The Rashes hain't our boys."

"Benjamin an' Mordecai are runctious an' mean," said Forbearance, "but you lit into 'em 'fore they raised a finger."

David looked like he was about to become indignant again, but Constance pleaded, "Can't we let be? I'm sure if everyone stays mannersome, there won't be no new factions."

Alexandra scowled, and waited sullenly for Darla and Angelique to return with a manager who could lift the Bar. She hadn't been planning to start any factions!

"Don't worry, Alex," Anna whispered to her. "We'll just ignore Larry this year, all right?"

Alexandra nodded, but suspected Larry would be just as hard to ignore as last year.

Fortunately, they didn't see any sign of Larry and his friends, including the Rash twins, while they wended their way through Grundy's multiple floors. Alexandra was starting to wonder if Vance had been assigned chaperone duties as a punishment, since he clearly didn't think much of having to supervise a bunch of seventh graders. After they purchased their required new school and workshop robes, Darla and Angelique wanted to visit Bath & Body Charms, David wanted to price brooms, and Anna wanted to pick up some owl treats in the Familiars and Pets Department. Under their relentless pestering, Vance told them to go ahead and look around, but warned them not to leave the store, and that he'd better not have to go looking for them after lunch.

The seventh graders passed by a demonstration of Quote-Quills and Spell-Checked Pens, scribbling away by themselves as a saleswizard hawked them to the students. Alexandra was bored while Darla and Angelique compared floral hair charms, wand-activated bubble bath potions, and Everlasting Soap Bars in the Bath & Body Charms Department, but she was as interested as David in brooms, though it was clear that the price was much more than she could afford, even for the most basic model. In the Familiars and Pets Department, Alexandra saw cats and puppies and rodents, frogs and turtles, lizards and a few snakes, but Grundy's didn't seem to stock birds. Anna picked up her owl treats, however, and Alexandra noticed the Pritchards looking wistfully at them, obviously wishing they could buy some for their own owls. Alexandra didn't see anything at all for

ravens. She suspected Charlie would happily eat owl treats, so she bought two packages, with the money she'd converted at Gringotts.

By now it was past lunchtime, so when they went down to the cafeteria in the basement, they were all hungry.

The Grundy's cafeteria contained a large number of tables in the center of a huge room, surrounded on all sides by buffets and deli counters. The serving lines were staffed by a combination of humans and Clockworks. There were a lot of other Charmbridge students already there – including, Alexandra noticed, Larry and his friends. By now the Rashes had joined him. Constance and Forbearance ducked their heads, as if hoping not to be noticed by the Rashes, but the older Ozarker boys had noticed them, and were already scowling in their direction. Alexandra and Anna led everyone to a table far from the boys. Vance followed indifferently.

Alexandra's eye was on the Muggle-Fried Specials section, wondering just what wizards thought 'Muggle-Fried' meant, but then she heard Darla let out an excited little squeal. She turned to see what the other girl was fussing about now, and noticed for the first time a group of six teenagers sitting at a table to themselves, all wearing blue and silver military-style uniforms, with dark blue cloaks lying neatly folded on the benches next to them.

They looked like they were probably juniors or seniors, but they definitely weren't Charmbridge students. There were four boys and two girls. They sat erectly in their seats, barely seemed to notice the other students and adults around them, and ate together in a stiff, almost synchronized fashion.

"Stormcrows," said Vance.

"Huh?" Alexandra turned to look at him. David was also puzzled.

"BMI students," Anna told them, and when David looked at her quizzically, she elaborated: "The Blacksburg Magery Institute. The students there call themselves 'Stormcrows.' It's like their school mascot, or something."

“Do they all wear uniforms?” asked David.

“And what are they doing here?” asked Alexandra, but then Darla let out another squeal, this one much, much louder and higher-pitched. Then she practically screamed, “Martin!”

Heads turned all around the cafeteria. One of the BMI boys looked up, startled, as Darla ran over to their table.

“Martin, oh-my-stars-above-what-are-you-doing-here?” Darla squealed, in one breath, and then, just barely slowing down enough to be comprehensible, said in a rush, “I just sent an owl last night and I was hoping maybe you'd sent one when you got back home but you never told me you were going to be in Chicago and I can't believe you're actually sitting here in Grundy's I could just die right now what are you doing here I'm so happy to see you isn't this wonderful!” She was clasping her hands over her heart, looking delighted and smitten. (And ridiculous, Alexandra thought.) One of the uniformed teenagers, a good-looking, dark-haired boy with narrow eyes set in a round face, stared at her. The other five Stormcrows were also looking at Darla, with expressions ranging from bemusement to scorn.

Alexandra and her friends wandered over, with Vance following a few paces behind.

“You know this girl, Martin?” asked one of the other boys, with a smirk.

“Yeah.” Martin cleared his throat. “She was a kid on that cruise my family took this summer. Hello, Darla.”

Darla beamed. “Did you get my owl?” she asked eagerly.

“Probably not, if you just sent it last night,” Martin replied.

“I meant the one I sent last week,” she said.

“Oh. I might have. I've been pretty busy.”

Darla's smile wavered, but then returned. "So why are you in Chicago? And why didn't you tell me you'd be in Central? I would have asked my parents to let you come visit, or we could have met –"

Alexandra noticed that all of the BMI students looked bemused, except for one, a tall, handsome, broad-shouldered boy with straight hair as dark as Martin's. He was studying Alexandra and the other Charmbridge students next to her, rather than staring at Darla, who was still babbling.

"Are you MASE Program students?" Vance asked, interrupting Darla.

The Stormcrows nodded. "Our year to come to Charmbridge," said one of the other BMI boys, a dark-skinned young man with his head shaved almost bare, who looked older than the rest.

"Oh my stars above!" Darla exclaimed, looking as if she were going to swoon. "This is wonderful! Why didn't you tell me, Martin?"

Martin looked quite embarrassed by now, and even more so when one of the uniformed girls purred, "Now I see why you didn't tell us about your summer romance, Martin."

All of them laughed. Martin rolled his eyes. "Nothing like that!" he snorted.

"I knew you liked brunettes," smirked the other girl, whose blonde hair was pulled back away from her face in a neat, tight bun, "but not that you liked them so young!"

The Stormcrows were all teasing Martin now. Even the serious-looking boy who'd been studying the other Charmbridge students was smiling. Vance was laughing, too, while Darla looked confused.

"She's just a kid," Martin demurred. "Followed me around like a puppy on the cruise."

"Martin!" Darla exclaimed.

“She seems to have a crush on you,” remarked one of the girls. “That’s so sweet.” Her smile wasn’t very sweet.

“You know how the girls love me.” Martin winked at the two girls sitting next to him, and they snickered.

The quieter, dark-haired boy interrupted them. “It’s almost fifteen-hundred. We need to get back,”

“All right, Max.” Martin smiled patronizingly at Darla. “See you around, Darla.” The BMI students rose from their seats as one, and put on their cloaks, fastening them over their shoulders.

“Martin! Don’t you... I mean, wouldn’t you like me to... to show you around Charmbridge, or – where will you be staying while you’re in Chicago?” Darla’s expression was piteous. All of the older kids, including Vance, now looked thoroughly amused.

“I don’t need little girls following me around at school,” Martin admonished her, as if speaking to a much younger child. “It was cute on the ship, but you need to run off and play with your friends now, all right?” He winked at her, and then the Stormcrows all marched out of the cafeteria together.

Vance looked down at Darla, and shook his head. “You going to get something to eat or not?” he asked the seventh graders.

They did, except for Darla. She sat at the table, looking down at her hands, with tears welling in her eyes. Angelique brought back some Muggle-Fried Chicken and blue ice-milk, and tried to share it with her roommate, but Darla shook her head and refused to eat.

“He’s obviously a jerk,” Alexandra declared, bringing back a peppermeat sausage and fire-corn combo, and a bottle of Fizzy-Pop. Anna nodded in agreement as she sat down next to Alexandra. Across the table, the Pritchards were opening the lunches they had brought for themselves, while David sat down with a plate piled high with various appetizers from the buffet line.

"He's too old for you anyway," David said bluntly. "You didn't really think a high school dude wanted to be your boyfriend, did you?"

Angelique and the Pritchards glared at him, and then Darla burst into tears.

David looked flustered. "I just meant –"

Constance cut him off. "What you meant's plain enough."

"Don't mean you ought to've said it," said Forbearance.

Alexandra washed the fiery taste of her peppermeat sausage down with some Fizzy-Pop, while she watched Angelique and the Pritchards try to soothe Darla. She agreed with David, and thought Darla was being silly. Why did she care about some stupid boy that much anyway? As annoying as Darla could be, though, Alexandra wouldn't have wished a public humiliation like that on her.

Boys could be cruel, she thought, and gave David a narrow look. He looked back at her and raised an eyebrow, then shook his head, and popped a crispy fried batwing into his mouth.

Cultures

Alexandra's mother and stepfather didn't relent, and she remained grounded through her last week of summer vacation. The visit to the Goblin Market had cheered her up considerably, though. Seeing wizards and witches, goblins and elves, Clockworks, and winged horses again was enough to reassure her that the wizarding world was still there, waiting for her.

She even studied, a little, skimming her textbooks for the coming semester. She looked up 'Recolligo' in her Charms textbook, and found it was called a 'Reconstruction Spell,' and with several variations, could put back together all sorts of things that had been broken or torn into pieces.

Next time, burn the letter, she thought.

An owl arrived that week from Charmbridge Academy, with a form on which she was to choose her elective, listing three choices in order of preference. She still hadn't made up her mind, and the owl sat on her windowsill, hooting impatiently, as she chewed on a pen trying to decide what to write. Its hooting became louder and angrier, until Alexandra finally quieted it by pouring out some of the owl treats she'd bought for Charlie onto her desk. The owl nibbled on these, while Charlie protested.

Alexandra finally wrote: '(1) Magical Ecology. (2) Arithmancy. (3) Practical Magical Exercise.' She rolled the form back up, tied it to the owl's leg, and gave it another owl treat, before it flew off.

"Stop complaining, Charlie," she lectured her raven, who was still eyeing the owl treats greedily. "I'll give you some more treats when you can go a whole week without stealing anything."

The morning that the Charmbridge bus returned, her mother waited with her once again in the parking lot. It was Claudia's first day off in a week. Archie was already at work. He'd given Alexandra a gruff good-bye the night before, and an awkward, one-armed hug, which Alexandra had returned, just as awkwardly.

Now, she stood with her mother, wondering how another entire summer had passed without them having had a real conversation. Somehow her resolve to confront her mother had faltered; she could not bring herself to speak her father's name in their home, as if it might unleash something that couldn't be undone.

Alexandra was wearing slacks and a short-sleeved white shirt conforming to Charmbridge's dress code. Charlie was unhappily caged, sitting on top of Alexandra's traveling case, making irritable croaking noises. A slight breeze stirred the raven's feathers, but it was still a pleasant day outside; the worst heat of summer had passed, but it hadn't yet gotten chilly.

"By the time you come home for Christmas, we won't be here anymore." Her mother gestured at the apartment complex behind them.

Alexandra nodded. Her mother and Archie were still arguing about exactly where they would be, she knew. "You'll let me know your new address, right?" she asked, with a trace of sarcasm.

Her mother looked at her askance, and shook her head. "You've been awfully sulky this summer, Alex. I know it hasn't been easy, living in this little apartment. And I know you had some kind of falling out with Brian."

Finally figured that out? Alexandra thought bitterly, and almost said something about Vacation Bible School contributing to her 'sulkiness,' but she just shrugged.

Claudia Green sighed. The Charmbridge bus pulled into the parking lot, and she put an arm around her daughter's shoulders and leaned in to give her a kiss on the cheek. "I will miss you, you know," she murmured quietly.

"Yeah," Alexandra mumbled. "I'll miss you, too." Somewhere deep down she knew that was probably true, but right now, she could hardly wait to get away from Larkin Mills.

Mrs. Speaks greeted Alexandra and Mrs. Green cheerfully once again, and then Alexandra boarded the bus, with a final wave to her mother.

Each year, the Charmbridge bus collected students throughout the week before the start of class; Anna and the Pritchards were already at the academy, so Alexandra sat with Darla and Angelique, who had just been picked up from the Chicago Wizardrail station. Darla didn't seem to have gotten over Martin entirely, as she was quiet for most of the trip, holding her black cat in her lap and staring out the window, rather than being a chatty, pretentious know-it-all like she usually was. Angelique had her jarvey in a carrier cage, for which she had fortunately mastered a Silencing Charm. Alexandra set Charlie's cage on the table, and watched as her raven and Darla's cat glared at each other, while she and Angelique talked, with only occasional contributions from Darla.

David boarded the bus in Detroit, dressed in clothing appropriate for Charmbridge Academy, instead of the defiantly Muggle sports t-shirt and shorts he'd worn last year. He greeted the girls amiably, glanced at Darla, and exchanged a look with Alexandra, who just rolled her eyes and shook her head. He shrugged and set his familiar's cage on the table next to Charlie's. Inside, Malcolm, his falcon, sat hooded and apparently docile.

"What does a falcon hunt in the city?" asked Alexandra, once the bus began moving again.

"Rats," David replied. "And the occasional cat."

Alexandra thought he was joking, by the way the corners of his mouth twitched slightly when he looked at Darla, but the curly brunette just gave him a sour look, while her cat bristled in her arms. Angelique shook her head and gave him a glare that warned him against any more attempts at humor at Darla's expense.

Alexandra cleared her throat, and asked him about Quidditch tryouts instead. David had begun studying the game intensively. Alexandra thought Quodpot, with its exploding balls, was more interesting, but

any game where you got to fly on a broom sounded exciting. She had not seriously thought about joining any teams, though.

The small talk lasted for nearly an hour, until they reached a winding road up one side of a mountain that appeared almost untraveled by Muggles. At the point where the road leveled off and began to descend down the other side, they would disembark. Alexandra and David both fell silent, remembering their first trip across the Invisible Bridge, the previous year.

Once the bus did stop, the students exited to stand on a bluff overlooking a river, far below. The sixth graders all stared at the valley before them, nervous and excited, much as Alexandra and her friends had when they had first come here. Nearly a mile across the valley, red cliffs rose up to face them on the other side. A thick forest stretched as far back as the eye could see, and Alexandra knew Charmbridge Academy was waiting, just a short hike through those trees.

She held up Charlie's cage. "I hope you're ready to save us again, just in case."

The raven squawked. David laughed nervously, and Mrs. Speaks, overhearing her, admonished, "Now, don't be silly, Miss Quick! Everything is perfectly safe!" She smiled reassuringly at the sixth graders.

Alexandra was sure it was perfectly safe – but she and David still waited until the older students were already walking across the Invisible Bridge over the valley before they followed. She noticed Darla and Angelique looking a little nervous before they joined them.

The students all appeared to be walking on air, half a mile above the ground. It was a dizzying height, and one of the sixth graders balked and had to be coaxed out onto the Invisible Bridge by Mrs. Speaks, holding the young boy's hand. He wasn't the only sixth grader who looked terrified. Alexandra wondered if her classmates had looked like that to the older students. Of course she hadn't been frightened!

She spread her arms, pretending she was flying like a bird. They were floating on air, held up only by an invisible, enchanted bridge. This was magic! She was back in the wizarding world, and this year, she told herself, she was going to stay out of trouble.

Charmbridge students generally stayed in the same room from one year to the next, so Delta Delta Kappa Tau Hall was now the seventh grade girls' dormitory. The portrait of the old, bearded warlock who hung above the entrance to the hall welcomed the girls back as they passed beneath him. Alexandra thought he looked a little less enthusiastic when he saw her, but he nodded and even gave her a little wink.

Anna was already in the room they shared, and she beamed when Alexandra came through the door. Last year, both of them had arrived at Charmbridge hardly knowing anyone, and Alexandra had picked Anna as her roommate almost at random, little knowing they would become best friends.

"It's good to be back," Alexandra declared. Charlie squawked agreement, or maybe it was just a demand to be let out. Alexandra set the cage on her desk and opened the door, and Charlie immediately hopped out, and took off through the open window.

"I let Jingwei out, too," Anna said, referring to her great horned owl. "I'll put her in the aviary later, but I figured she'd like to fly around a bit first."

Alexandra nodded, as she began unpacking her books and clothes. Through the door to the bathroom that they shared with the room next to them, they heard Darla and Angelique moving around and opening drawers. Then a familiar, abrasive voice screeched, "What kind of pigs live here?" Anna sighed, and Alexandra rolled her eyes. Angelique's foul-mouthed pet jarvey could only be Silenced for so long.

Despite the prospect of fighting with their suitemates over bathroom time in the morning again, Alexandra was comforted by the familiarity of her surroundings. The previous year, she had been new to the wizarding world, and hadn't yet gotten used to portraits that talked,

and meals served by Clockwork golems. Now, however, she fancied herself a veteran, with an entire year's worth of experience under her belt. She was cheerful at breakfast the next morning, and looking forward to her classes. She even remembered to check the seventh grade bulletin board in their hall.

"Well, your name hasn't appeared there yet," Anna observed wryly.

Alexandra gave her roommate a mock scowl, then grinned, and patted her on the arm. "I'm not going to get into trouble like last year, Anna."

The other girl looked at her skeptically.

"I haven't even gotten into a fight with Larry yet!" Alexandra protested.

"And it's almost breakfast!"

Alexandra shook her head, but they were laughing as they entered the cafeteria. They waited in line for the Clockworks to serve them from a hearty buffet selection. Alexandra put a pile of pancakes on her plate, and added some scrambled eggs and a glass of orange juice. Anna chose toast, cold cereal, and a bowl of fruit. As they headed to the table where their friends were sitting, another girl bumped into Anna, hard enough to tip over her cereal bowl. Milk went spilling across her tray and dripped down the front of her robe.

The other girl was one of the new sixth graders. She was Asian, and even shorter than Anna. Alexandra was startled, however, when instead of apologizing, or even saying, "Oops," the smaller girl gave Anna a nasty look and kept walking.

"Hey!" Alexandra called, but the younger girl kept walking. Alexandra was tempted to set off after her and grab her by the shoulder, but Anna shook her head. "Forget about it, Alex." She walked to the table and set her tray down, and then took out her wand and cleaned up the spilled milk and dried the front of her robe with a simple charm.

"That girl has an attitude!" Alexandra exclaimed, sitting down between Anna and Constance, and then looked around as all her friends

started laughing at her. "What?" she demanded, as they exchanged knowing looks.

Following breakfast was the first assembly of the year, when the Dean, Vice Dean, and Assistant Deans would address the student body. Every student in the academy filed into the amphitheater, through four different entrances. Alexandra and her friends sat several rows up from the center. The sixth graders filled the rows in front of them, and Alexandra stared for a moment at the small Asian girl who'd bumped into Anna in the cafeteria. She was sitting between a couple of other sixth grade girls, and while the girls on either side of her were whispering excitedly and looking around, she was sitting quietly, looking straight ahead with her hands folded in her lap.

The voices around the amphitheater died as a dozen adults walked onto the stage. Dean Grimm was dressed in formal blue and black robes, and the other faculty members were similarly dressed. Alexandra knew who most of them were, but there was a fat, red-faced woman, fidgeting in her robes, whom she didn't recognize.

"Good morning, students and staff," said Dean Grimm, and her voice silenced the last few conversations still going on out in the amphitheater. Alexandra stared at her, trying to note any differences between her and her sister. Lilith Grimm's commanding gaze and voice were definitely the same as last year. She went through introductions of the Vice Dean and Assistant Deans and Department Heads on the stage with her. Alexandra was uninterested until Dean Grimm announced the Dean of seventh graders, Caelum Black, who was a mild-looking man with graying hair and tiny spectacles. Dean Grimm also introduced the round, red-faced witch as Libby Gale, the new Groundskeeper and Chief Custodian. That caused Alexandra to give her more scrutiny, but the woman seemed harmless.

So did Mr. Journey, she reminded herself. The previous Chief Custodian had been a very nice man – who turned out to be a fugitive warlock who'd been trying to kill her all year.

After being introduced, Ms. Gale left the stage, visibly relieved, and Dean Grimm continued with a speech very much like last year's, and which Alexandra assumed she'd be hearing variations of for the next

five years. There were rules against certain types of magic, and against possessing certain types of magic items. Hexing and cursing each other was not permitted, not even as a joke. (Alexandra and Anna exchanged a look – that was probably the most frequently violated rule at Charmbridge Academy, next to 'No Public Displays of Affection.') Students were warned not to try to change their schedules because they didn't like a teacher, not to leave their wands unattended, not to allow familiars loose inside the school, not to violate curfew, and so on.

Alexandra was beginning to tune out the speech, when she heard the Dean mention the Blacksburg Magery Institute, and began paying attention again.

"These six juniors and seniors will be attending Charmbridge Academy all year as part of the Magical Academy Student Exchange Program," Ms. Grimm was saying. "I hope you'll give them all a warm welcome." Everyone clapped dutifully as the six BMI students who had been in the Grundy's cafeteria stood up, in the highest row at the back of the amphitheater. They were wearing their uniforms again, and stood stiffly at attention, each of them acknowledging their name as it was called with a brisk half-bow. Alexandra glanced down her row at Darla, as Martin Nguyen bowed, but Darla was looking at Dean Grimm, not turning around in her seat to look at the Stormcrows as most of the other students were. The handsome, serious boy Alexandra had noticed before was named Maximilian King. The other two boys were Tybalt Franklin and Pierce Prince, and the girls who had found Darla so amusing were Adelaide Speir and Beatrice Hawthorne.

Finally, the assembly was over. Many of the girls had been whispering excitedly when the Stormcrows were introduced, and now they were sighing over the uniformed boys in a way that made Alexandra's eyes roll. Some of the older kids began teasing Darla about her 'boyfriend' – the incident at Grundy's had by now gotten around the school – but Darla seemed to be studiously ignoring the taunts. Alexandra was actually surprised at Darla's self control. Normally her buttons were much easier to push. Since the Stormcrows were in the eleventh and twelfth grades, though,

Alexandra didn't expect either she or Darla would have much interaction with them.

When they received their schedules, Alexandra was pleased to see that she'd been given her first choice of electives: Magical Ecology.

"Geomancy," sighed Anna, looking at her schedule. "Too bad we don't have the same elective."

Alexandra laughed. "We have three other classes together! You teach me any cool spells you learn in Geomancy, and I'll tell you about all the magical animals I learn about."

"You don't really learn spells in Geomancy," said Anna.

"Let us know what you find out about Hodags," David teased, following after them, and Alexandra tried to elbow him, as he laughed and dodged out of the way.

The first few days of class were uneventful. Their Charms and Transfiguration teachers were the same as last year: the humorless Mr. Newton and the affable, slightly addled Mr. Hobbes. Alexandra was disappointed that Mr. Grue also taught seventh grade Potions and Alchemy; the large, bearded Alchemy teacher had taken a dislike to her last year, and from the scowl he gave her when she entered his classroom and sat down next to Anna, his opinion of her hadn't changed.

Anna had tested into a more advanced Magical Theory class, as had the Pritchards. Alexandra was feeling a little disgruntled at this when she and David, along with Darla and Angelique, entered their Basic Magical Theory classroom for the first time. She was expecting to see Ms. Shirtliffe, the scarred, hard-bitten defense instructor, as she taught sixth graders Basic Principles of Magic. Instead, they had a new instructor, an attractive young blonde witch named Miss Hart, who seemed barely old enough to be a teacher. Her first lessons were much too advanced, and then they became much too simple, and throughout class she had particular trouble keeping the boys focused; they were more interested in looking at her than at their textbooks.

The pleasant but patronizing Mrs. Middle was their Wizard Social Studies teacher again. Their first few lessons reviewed everything they had learned the previous year about Ministries of Magic in other countries, and the International Confederation of Wizards. Alexandra found it boring; she wanted to learn magic! Wizard Social Studies was a class she merely endured, and her grades last year had reflected her disinterest.

She was initially quite excited about Magical Ecology, but when Mr. Fledgefield handed out a course outline, Alexandra was disappointed to see that dragons, basilisks, minotaurs, sea serpents, and giant spiders did not appear anywhere on it. Neither did Hodags. Instead, it appeared the first few weeks would be spent learning about common magical plants like whipweed, Flitterblooms, and Puffapods, followed by a unit on trees, and then moving into animals at the end of the semester – and Knarls, Clabberts, and hoop snakes didn't sound as interesting as dragons.

When she approached Mr. Fledgefield about this after class, he gave her a bemused smile.

"I've heard you tend to be fascinated with anything that's dangerous, Miss Quick."

She frowned. "I am not. I just wanted to learn about..." She frowned again.

"Dangerous magical creatures?" Fledgefield suggested. He chuckled. "There are more Magizology and Magibotany classes available as electives in higher grades. We aren't going to let seventh graders handle mandrakes or go looking for Sasquatches. Pass this class, and you'll get to do more interesting things later. I imagine you've heard that before."

"A lot," Alexandra grumbled. She resigned herself to learning about nettles and flowers and vines, and wondered how her mother and stepfather would react to her bringing home a Fanged Geranium.

With the first week of class also came various clubs and other extracurricular organizations seeking to recruit new members. Posters in hallways whistled and beckoned to passing students, and in the open center courtyard that everyone used as a shortcut to move between classes, club tables were set up, and charmed to chase students around until someone took a flyer or a button.

"I'm thinking about joining the Witch Rangers," Alexandra told Anna one night.

Her roommate looked up at her. "You know that their Good Witch's Pledge is actually a binding oath, right? You have to promise to respect authority, follow school rules, obey your parents, never practice Dark Arts, never use magic in front of Muggles, never cast hexes or curses..."

Alexandra grimaced, then noticed that Anna was dipping her hands into a small bowl, and using a small brush on her fingertips. "Are you painting your nails?" she asked, astonished.

"No." Anna winced. "I'm regrowing them."

"What?" Alexandra scooted over to look in the bowl, which was filled with a translucent, milky-white liquid, and then at Anna's hands. She gasped in horror when she saw that several of Anna's fingernails appeared to be little more than a thin film over the pink nubs of skin at the end of her fingers. "Anna, what happened?"

"A Nail-Pulling Jinx." Anna's voice was very quiet.

"Nail... pulling?" Alexandra's face contorted in fury. "Anna, who did this to you?"

"They'll grow back overnight. Mrs. Murphy gave me a diluted Fudd's Grow-All solution."

"Did you tell her who did it?"

Anna shook her head. She was looking at her fingers, and avoided looking at her friend.

"Why not?" Alexandra demanded.

Anna looked up at her, finally. "Is that what you'd do?" she asked.

Alexandra frowned. "Well, no," she admitted. "I'd hex whoever did it back, harder!"

Anna sighed. "And be sent to the Dean's Office."

"So, you won't tell, and you won't fight back? That's stupid, Anna. Who was it?" Then Alexandra's expression darkened even more. "Was it Larry Albo?" she growled. "If it was him, I swear I'll –"

"It wasn't Larry, Alex."

"Then who?"

"I don't want you getting in trouble."

Alexandra stared at her, then it hit her. "Was it that girl who bumped into you in the cafeteria?" When Anna looked down, Alexandra sputtered, "Are you kidding me? You're being bullied by a sixth grader?"

Anna pouted a little, and looked hurt. "I can handle it."

"How, by waiting until she's stupid enough to jinx you in front of a teacher? What's her problem, anyway? Do you know each other?"

"No, not really. Look, Alex, I'm not going to just let her keep hexing me. But I don't want you to get involved. Promise you'll stay out of it."

Alexandra shook her head. "I will not promise to do nothing if you keep coming back to our room missing fingernails!"

"I won't. Don't worry, she has no idea who she's messing with."

Alexandra sat back, surprised. Anna was not one to make threats like that. She looked at her diminutive roommate, then nodded. "Okay. 'Cause you know I won't stand by and let my friends get hurt."

Anna smiled at her. "I know."

The next morning at breakfast, Alexandra watched carefully, as the girls from the sixth grade dorms trickled into the cafeteria. The other Asian girl cast a glance in Anna's direction, and then noticed Alexandra looking at her and stared back. She and Alexandra locked gazes for a moment, and then one of the younger girl's friends asked her something, and she turned away. The sixth graders went to sit at another table.

David was talking about Quidditch tryouts. Alexandra wasn't paying much attention, until she heard him snapping his fingers and whistling. "Yoo hoo, Alex?"

She turned back towards him and scowled. "I'm sorry, is there a dog named Alex around here?"

He grinned. "Just trying to get your attention. ASPEW is having its first meeting tomorrow. You gonna join this year? Since you haven't managed to get yourself detention yet?"

"Hah, hah," she replied sarcastically. But she nodded, though not with as much enthusiasm as David might have liked. Last year, she had promised to join the American Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare, but continual detentions and other distractions had kept her from participating. She did sympathize with David's concern for the house-elves, though, and she couldn't think of a reason to beg off now that didn't sound selfish. And it reminded her that she owed Bran and Poe a visit.

Mrs. Minder, the librarian, was delighted to see Alexandra again, which made Alexandra happy, since not many of Charmbridge's staff were. When she asked if she could visit the library elves, Mrs. Minder looked around.

“Well, you know they're not supposed to be out among the stacks during regular library hours,” she whispered, “but I suppose I could let you go downstairs to the storage basement.”

The reminder that the elves were kept hidden away from the rest of the student body – still doing their work, just not where the students could see them doing it – made Alexandra think ASPEW had a point. But she also knew from her previous conversations with Bran and Poe that they loved working in the library. The thought of doing anything else reduced them to tears.

The two elves were sorting books that had been removed from the shelves as too out-of-date, too damaged, or 'Inappropriate for Minors,' as Alexandra saw on one stamp that Bran was applying to a volume that appeared to be bound in singed black leather.

“Alexandra Quick!” exclaimed Bran, bouncing to his feet.

“Miss Quick has come to visit Bran and Poe!” exclaimed Poe joyfully.

“Hi guys. Missed you over the summer.” Alexandra grinned at them. The two library elves had been among the best friends Alexandra had at school. She knew how lonely they felt, as much as they liked spending all day surrounded by books. Mrs. Minder was very nice to them, but regarded them as helpers, not friends.

Alexandra spent some time chatting with Bran and Poe, and learned that they inspected each and every book in the library every summer, and the shelves as well.

“Naughty childrens puts some awful curses on library books sometimes,” Poe sighed.

“Or tries to undo the charms that keeps their naughty fingers off of books they shouldn't be touching.” Bran's wrinkled forehead scrunched up even more as he regarded Alexandra, but his eyes twinkled, as she adopted her most innocent expression.

After chatting with them for a while, she promised before she left that she would come visit again. "But hopefully not to serve detention," she added.

She'd been unable to get around to the subject of ASPEW. As before, any discussion that touched on the topic of house-elf servitude and whether or not they should be freed made Bran and Poe so nervous that Alexandra was dissuaded from pursuing the point.

When she climbed back up the stairs and emerged into the main room of the huge Charmbridge library, she saw Anna sitting at a table with two older students, both of them Chinese. There weren't many Chinese students at Charmbridge Academy, and Alexandra hadn't seen Anna socializing much with any of them, so she was a little surprised. But she didn't think much about it until the next day, when Anna was looking rather smug at breakfast – and her tiny nemesis seemed to be absent.

Alexandra didn't think it was a coincidence when an unscheduled assembly was called that morning, during which Dean Grimm lectured the entire school on Charmbridge's disciplinary policy, with particular emphasis on jinxes, hexes, and curses. The Dean's final warning was particularly ominous: "In particular, using curses that can cause serious harm or death will be grounds for expulsion!"

Anna was suspiciously quiet for the rest of the day, and Alexandra decided not to press her until after the ASPEW meeting that afternoon.

Dewshine Jennifer, the club president, was wearing shimmering robes with some sort of rainbow charm on them; bands of colors drifted across her and shifted from one hue to another, in an almost hypnotic effect. Other kids were also dressed in bizarre or nonconformist styles. Some of the ASPEW members were Radicalists, like Dewshine, while many were Muggle-borns like herself and David. Dewshine seemed pleased to have Alexandra join them, though she looked a little bit suspicious.

After accepting a large 'Elves are People Too! ASPEW!' button, Alexandra heard a couple of the ASPEWers discussing the Dean's lecture.

"That's a pretty advanced spell," a sophomore named George Bombeck was saying. "And the Medusa's Curse is Dark magic, if you ask me."

"Medusa's Curse?" Alexandra asked.

"That's what sent Tomo Matsuzaka to the infirmary," George told her. "Her own hair tried to strangle her."

David, listening in, nodded. "Heard Mrs. Murphy had to cut it off."

Alexandra frowned, remembering Anna talking to the older students the day before.

Dewshine turned their attention to ASPEW's agenda for the coming year: the complete abolition, for once and for all, of house-elf labor at Charmbridge (Alexandra bit her tongue, wanting to ask what exactly they would have Bran and Poe do instead), making Muggle Studies mandatory for all students, and more "inclusiveness" of different Cultures (whatever that meant).

"How come Anna isn't here?" David asked, as Dewshine finished speaking. "She said she'd join last year, too. I already asked Constance and Forbearance, but they 'don't want no part in no agitatin'.'" He looked disgruntled.

"I don't know." Alexandra shrugged. "I'll ask her."

As soon as the ASPEW club adjourned, having distributed buttons for everyone to wear, and made plans to begin writing letters and requesting meetings with the Dean (which they had done all last year as well), Alexandra went back to her room. Anna was doing her Geomancy homework.

"You know," Alexandra declared, without preamble, "when you said you'd deal with her yourself, I didn't think you meant you were going to try to have her killed."

Anna raised her head, with an expression that was defensive and a little guilty. "I didn't know what Xiaoming was going to do, but I'm sure he didn't curse her hair to actually strangle her to death."

Alexandra shook her head. "Siccing older kids on her? You'd let them curse her, but you won't let your friends help you?"

"It doesn't involve you, Alex."

"Of course it involves me! I'm your friend! Why do you and Tomo have it out for each other, anyway?"

Anna sighed. "I didn't start it. She's the one who started saying... stuff, when she got here. Just like you'd expect from them."

Alexandra blinked. "Them?"

"The Majokai."

Alexandra folded her arms and stared at her roommate, and Anna sighed again.

"She's Japanese. I'm Chinese. Chinese and Japanese wizarding families don't get along."

"You mean, you two are cursing each other just because you're from different countries?"

"We're from the same country as you, Alex," Anna corrected her, a little sharply. "But different cultures. We almost went to war during the California Disunification, and now... well, technically we're both part of the Confederation, but we assimilated. Majokai wizards didn't. They demanded to be recognized as a separate Culture, and they live apart from everyone else. I don't even know what Tomo is doing here. They have their own schools."

Alexandra found all of this very confusing, and a little disconcerting. "Ozarkers are like a separate culture too, aren't they? Constance and Forbearance said most Ozarkers are home-schooled, but they came here."

"Constance and Forbearance don't look down on everyone else."

"No, but Benjamin and Mordecai Rash do," Alexandra pointed out. "And they called us both Mudbloods."

Anna's expression was unusually harsh. "Like I said, I didn't go calling her names. She started it."

"Okay." Alexandra frowned. "But do you think it will end now?"

"If Tomo knows what's good for her." Anna's voice, too, had an edge to it that Alexandra wasn't used to hearing from her roommate. "There aren't any other Majokai kids here."

Alexandra lay awake for a while that night, her arms folded behind her head as she looked up at the ceiling, thinking. Of course she sided with Anna. Anna was her friend. But she couldn't help thinking that this conflict over cultures sounded kind of stupid. Maybe she still didn't understand the wizarding world at all.

Tomo Matsuzaka was apparently here all by herself. At least Alexandra knew there were other Muggle-borns like herself. Both pairs of Ozarker twins had each other. Anna wasn't the only Chinese student in school. Alexandra realized, with surprise and dismay, that she was feeling a little bit sorry for Tomo. As she drifted off to sleep, she resolved to put her sympathy aside. After all, if Tomo was making nasty comments about her friends, then she deserved what she got.

The next day, since Anna had dissuaded her from joining the Witch Rangers, Alexandra pestered her to come to the next ASPEW meeting. "C'mon, it'll be fun!"

Alexandra's forced attempt at enthusiasm must have been evident in her voice, because Anna gave her a skeptical look, as they walked to Wizard Social Studies. "It's not that I don't agree with them, kind of.

But I'm not sure I want to hang out with Radicalists. No one really trusts them, and my father would have a cow."

"I'm sure they're not all like Mr. Journey," Alexandra muttered.

Anna looked uncomfortable. "No, that's not what I meant. Radicalists believe all kinds of crazy things. We have lots of them back in California, too."

The wizarding world might still have been an alien culture to Alexandra, but it seemed that cultural differences within the wizarding world were playing out right at Charmbridge Academy. In Mrs. Middle's class, she actually looked up 'Cultures' in her textbook, and found an entire chapter on 'The Confederation's Many Cultures,' with an animated picture of children of all races, wearing traditional wizards' robes and witches' hats, Ozarker dresses and bonnets, rainbow shirts and headbands, black cassocks, dyed tunics and sandals, denim trousers and stovepipe hats, buckskin and beads and feathered headdresses, Japanese kimonos, and even one boy dressed like a Muggle, all holding hands and smiling cheerfully at her. But then Mrs. Middle scolded her for not having her book open to the correct page, and she turned back to the chapter titled 'The First Wizards in the New World.'

"What a whitewash," grumbled David, as they left Mrs. Middle's classroom.

"What do you mean?" asked Alexandra.

"Do you believe there weren't any wizards here until white people arrived?" David demanded.

Anna and Alexandra looked at each other, but it was the Pritchards, following along behind them in the hallway, who answered.

"Course there was," Constance piped up.

"The Indians got their own magic," said Forbearance.

“Exactly!” David nodded. “But I guess you only count as a wizard if you use a wand.”

“That's why there are Cultural Practice Exemptions,” Anna argued.

“That's why Indians don't usually educate at reg'lar schools,” Constance agreed.

“Do they have their own schools, like the Majokai?” asked Alexandra.

“The what?” David, Constance, and Forbearance all asked together.

As if on cue, Alexandra saw Tomo Matsuzaka coming down the hallway towards them, walking with her own group of friends. The small Japanese girl looked even smaller with her hair shorn. Previously, it had fallen down below her shoulders. Now it was cut so short she looked like a boy. Her eyes blazed hatefully as she saw Anna. Alexandra pretended not to notice her, and hoped they would all just pass one another by in the hallway without a word.

She was never quite sure afterwards whether Anna provoked Tomo with a look, or whether Tomo's seething anger bubbled over on its own, but Alexandra heard the other girl hiss something as they went past, and Anna hissed something back, and both girls spun around, exclaiming, “What did you call me?”

“Anna,” warned Alexandra, and Tomo's friends also looked as if they wanted to drag her away, but Anna and Tomo were ignoring everyone but each other.

“Bone-stealer!” screamed Tomo.

“Ghost-dwarf!” screamed Anna back.

Tomo began cursing in Japanese, and Anna began cursing in Chinese. Alexandra couldn't understand any of it, but it sounded awful, and worse, both girls had drawn their wands. Alexandra had never seen her quiet, soft-spoken roommate fly into a rage like this.

“Anna!” exclaimed Constance and Forbearance, aghast, and Alexandra and David both moved to restrain their friend, while the other sixth graders did the same to Tomo, but the two girls simultaneously cast hexes at each other. Anna's hair stood straight up and then every strand spiraled and kinked as Tomo's hex hit her, while Tomo's feet went flying out from under her and she almost landed on her head. David and Alexandra both received a nasty shock and had to let go of Anna.

Anna trembled and then pointed her wand again, while Tomo staggered to her feet and did the same.

“Expelliarmus!”

Alexandra had drawn her own wand almost without thinking about it, and Tomo's wand went flying from her hand. With a flick, Alexandra disarmed her roommate as well, and for one moment felt rather proud of herself. Then Tomo and Anna both leapt at one another and began punching and kicking and slapping.

Alexandra rushed in to separate them. She yanked Anna away, and grabbed Tomo by the front of her robes, glaring down at the younger girl, and then someone yelled, “Revulsio!” All three girls went flying away from each other. Someone grabbed Alexandra's arm and pinned it behind her, squeezing her wrist and forcing her to drop her wand. She saw a girl in a uniform grab Tomo, and Ms. Shirtliffe, who was also wearing a uniform, seized the back of Anna's cloak and hauled her to her feet, leaving her almost dangling like a kitten lifted by the scruff of its neck. Anna started to squawk indignantly, and then turned pale and fell silent when she saw who it was who'd grabbed her.

Alexandra twisted her head around angrily, and saw that she'd been grabbed by one of the BMI students, Maximilian King. He was looking down at her with a contemptuous scowl, as if he found it distasteful to lay hands on her. Around them, all the other Stormcrows, as well as what appeared to be Charmbridge's entire Junior Regimental Officer Corps, were now forcing the sixth and seventh graders, and all the other students who had been drawn to the brawl, back against the

walls on either side of the corridor, while Beatrice Hawthorne continued to pin Tomo's arms to her sides.

"What's going on here?" demanded Ms. Shirtliffe.

That provoked a simultaneous outpouring of accusations from both Anna and Tomo, until Shirtliffe snapped, "Quiet!" Both girls shut up immediately, still glaring at each other.

"Let go of me!" Alexandra hissed at the older boy who had her in an armlock. He didn't loosen his grip a bit.

"I'm surprised at you, Miss Chu," Shirtliffe scolded. She turned to Alexandra. "And you, in the middle of things again, Quick."

"Right, anything that happens around me is automatically my fault!" retorted Alexandra, through gritted teeth. All of the Blacksburg students looked shocked at this, as if they couldn't believe a seventh grader was talking back to a teacher like that. Shirtliffe clenched her jaw.

"King, Hawthorne, let go of them," she ordered, and King released Alexandra. She stepped away from him, rubbing her wrist and glaring at him. Tomo took a step away from Beatrice Hawthorne, still glowering angrily at Anna.

"The rest of you go on to class," Shirtliffe commanded, and looked at Tybalt Franklin. "You can begin covering courtesies and traditions with the new wands, Franklin."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, and he gestured at all the other uniformed students, who fell back into two neat columns and marched away.

Ms. Shirtliffe looked back down at Anna. "You three, come with me." She let go of Anna at last, who stumbled away from her and tried to smooth down her frazzled hair. "We're going to the Dean's Office."

Alexandra sighed inwardly, and saw David and the Pritchards looking at her with a mixture of sympathy and resignation. So much for staying out of trouble this year.

New Wands

Ms. Shirtliffe marched the three girls to the administrative wing, where the Deans and Assistant Deans all had their offices. The life-sized portrait of Miss Marmsley, who had been the school secretary for over half a century while she was alive, and for three-quarters of a century as a painting, looked down at them, and at Alexandra in particular, and sighed.

"Is the Dean busy, Miss Marmsley?" asked Ms. Shirtliffe politely.

"She always is, but I'll let her know you wish to see her, Mary," replied Miss Marmsley. She rose from her high-backed chair, gathered her skirts, and stepped outside the frame and disappeared. Alexandra knew she would now be reappearing in a much smaller portrait frame on Dean Grimm's desk. This entire scene was dreadfully familiar to her.

A few moments later, Miss Marmsley stepped back into her portrait frame. "You may go on in, Mary."

"Ms. Shirtliffe, or Colonel Shirtliffe, if you don't mind, Heather," Ms. Shirtliffe corrected her, smiling.

Miss Marmsley smiled back. "Of course, Ms. Shirtliffe."

Alexandra wondered what the stretched, exceedingly polite smiles were about, then looked down when Miss Marmsley's severe, disapproving gaze fell on her. She heard the secretary tut-tutting. When she looked up again, Miss Marmsley had picked up some stationery on the desk painted next to her, and resumed writing with a very large, old-fashioned quill.

Anna looked like she was about to cry. Tomo was trembling – whether with rage, or fear, Alexandra couldn't tell.

"We've been here before," she whispered to Anna. "We'll get stuck with detention. No big deal."

"Be quiet!" Miss Marmsley snapped, from her portrait.

A few minutes later, Ms. Shirtliffe emerged from the Dean's office and rejoined the three girls.

"The JROC is waiting for me," she said. "You've taken time away from me, and them, and I intend to get it back." She strode away, her boots making a solid click-click-clicking sound with each step on the polished floors.

Alexandra thought that was an odd and ominous thing to say, and then Miss Marmsley announced, "The Dean will see all three of you, now." The three girls wordlessly walked down the short hallway to the Dean's office. Alexandra pushed open the door, which Ms. Shirtliffe had left slightly ajar, and led the other two inside.

Dean Grimm sat behind her desk, elbows resting on the arms of her chair, hands steepled together, waiting. Her expression was dead calm and icy. Hanging on the wall behind her, portraits and photographs of previous Deans and other Charmbridge alumni gave the three girls disapproving stares. Ms. Grimm's black cat, Galen, was sitting in a basket by her desk, and adding a disapproving stare of its own. The girls all stood on the thick carpet in front of the Dean's desk, and Anna and Tomo immediately looked down.

"Well," observed the Dean, in a deceptively pleasant tone. "You went almost an entire week without finding yourself in my office, Miss Quick. That's an improvement over last year."

"It wasn't Alexandra's fault!" Anna blurted out.

Dean Grimm stared at Anna, who immediately gulped and looked down again. Tomo was already staring at her feet. Only Alexandra stubbornly kept her head up, trying not to flinch when the Dean looked at her.

"So," the Dean inquired, "whose fault was it, then, Miss Chu?"

"She started it!" Tomo and Anna pointed at each other and uttered the same accusation simultaneously. Grimm tapped her wand on her desk and warned, "The next one of you who speaks out of turn will be

Tongue-Tied until at least the end of the day. Miss Chu, explain yourself.”

“Tomo called me a name in the hallway. I... I called her a name back. We started yelling at each other, and then, we –” Anna looked down. “Well, Alexandra tried to break us up.”

“Miss Matsuzaka?” asked Dean Grimm, raising an eyebrow.

“She put the Medusa's Curse on me! Everyone knows it!” hissed Tomo. “And then she was acting all innocent, like she could just get away with it...”

“So the two of you thought it was appropriate to begin screaming derogatory names at each other in public, followed by hexing and fighting like a pair of cats. I see.” Dean Grimm looked at Alexandra. “And you, Miss Quick? Merely defending your friend, I suppose?”

“I suppose,” Alexandra replied sullenly. She had only been trying to break them up, but of course it didn't look that way to Ms. Shirliffe, and she wasn't about to try to dump all the blame on Anna.

“Do you need a refresher on manners, Miss Quick?”

“I suppose, Ms. Grimm,” Alexandra repeated, clenching her teeth.

“The Medusa's Curse is not an easy spell to cast, and it's certainly not taught in school. I am quite sure neither Miss Chu nor Miss Quick was directly responsible for casting it on you, Miss Matsuzaka. I don't suppose either of you knows who was?” The corner of the Dean's mouth twitched when Anna and Alexandra both looked down. “No, I didn't think so.”

Grimm laid her wand on her desk. Alexandra had been eyeing it warily, and now she glanced at the Dean's cat, who last year had chased her after one of the Dean's punishments had turned her into a rat. Galen was now yawning disinterestedly.

“I'm appalled at all three of you,” Ms. Grimm declared. “Miss Chu, Miss Matsuzaka, Charmbridge Academy welcomes students from all

over the Confederation. I do not tolerate bigotry. I doubt that either of you even knows why your respective cultures dislike each other. You probably just parrot whatever nonsense you hear at home.” The two Asian girls both bristled at that, but kept their mouths shut.

“I can't do anything about your parents' prejudices, but if you bring those prejudices here, I'll send you back to your parents. Do you understand me? I will not have these sorts of incidents at Charmbridge!”

Tomo and Anna gulped and nodded, and now both of them had tears in their eyes.

“And you, Miss Quick.” Dean Grimm frowned at her. “When your friends get in a fight, you just dive right in, don't you?”

No prejudices, right, Alexandra thought resentfully, but didn't say anything.

“I'm quite sure you know, as does Miss Chu, who cursed Miss Matsuzaka, but I suspect nothing short of Veritaserum will get the truth from you.” All three girls' faces turned red, for different reasons.

“I won't tolerate fighting in my school. All three of you are on probation for the rest of the semester. One more incident, and you will be suspended.”

Next to Alexandra, Anna and Tomo looked pale. Dean Grimm went on. “As for punishment, in Miss Matsuzaka's case, I'm going to leave that up to Dean Price. You may go see her now.”

Grimm gestured at the Japanese girl, who bowed and murmured, “Yes, Dean Grimm,” and backed away, before retreating out of the Dean's office, leaving Anna and Alexandra behind.

“Normally I'd send you two to Dean Black,” Grimm continued, after Tomo had gone, “but Ms. Shirtliffe made a suggestion, which I rather like. I understand she asked you to consider joining the JROC last year, Miss Quick.”

Alexandra blinked. Ms. Shirtliffe had suggested that. She wasn't sure why, but suspected it was because Shirtliffe liked the idea of making Alexandra march around and follow orders like the rest of the Junior Regimental Officer Corps. Alexandra had absolutely no interest in wearing one of those stupid uniforms or doing broom and wand drills all afternoon after class.

"I think it's an excellent idea, for both of you. Miss Quick, you could certainly use the discipline, and Miss Chu, you could use some more spine." Anna gasped indignantly, and Grimm scowled at her. "I know you didn't cast the Medusa's Curse on Miss Matsuzaka. Therefore, someone else did. Not only did you escalate your childish feud, but you used someone else to do it."

Anna looked down, with tears running down her cheeks. Alexandra was furious on her behalf.

"You can't make us join the JROC!" Alexandra argued. Anna winced.

Grimm's eyes narrowed, but she nodded. "You're right, Miss Quick, I can't. I can, however, suspend you both immediately. So, the JROC or suspension. Which is it going to be?"

Alexandra glared at her, and then stood up straight and raised her hand to her temple, in a sarcastic salute, like she'd seen on TV.

Ms. Grimm wasn't amused. "You can also have one week of detention, Miss Quick, for insolence. And it won't be spent in the library. Dismissed, both of you."

They had two more classes that day. In Alchemy, they told David, Constance, and Forbearance what had happened.

David found it amusing. "So you're gonna have to walk around the school in uniform? Can't wait to see that." Alexandra's incendiary look didn't wipe the grin off his face.

Anna just looked glum. "I don't want to be in the JROC," she groaned.

"I don't know what you're whimpering about, Miss Chu, but it doesn't sound like measuring or mixing," growled Mr. Grue, stomping over to Anna and Alexandra's desk. They had three piles of metallic dust in front of them – copper, tin, and zinc – which they were supposed to mix in their cauldrons in the correct proportions to use Base Metal Transformations to produce objects of brass and bronze. With all the metallic dust floating around the room, students were all wearing face masks. Mr. Grue, who had probably been breathing metal dust and even more unpleasant things for years, hadn't bothered putting on a mask, and his long hair and bushy black beard were glittering with metal particles. His black wool cassock, which made him look like a Russian Orthodox priest, was also sparkling.

Anna looked down and added another pinch of copper to her cauldron. Grue looked inside and snorted, which sent more dust flying. "Your bronze is going to be soft as clay," he scoffed, and stomped over to inspect Darla's work. "If you spent half the time preparing alchemical combinations that you do on your face and hair, you'd be at the top of the class, Miss Dearborn!" he barked at her. Darla put away the little brush she was using to sweep dust off her forehead, and started to apply heat to her cauldron with her wand.

He passed by the Pritchards, and shook his head, grumbling something about Ozarkers' lack of education, which made Constance and Forbearance both look ashamed as they remeasured their zinc. Alexandra scowled, both because Grue was bullying her friends, and because she suddenly noticed that it was mostly girls that he was criticizing – he just looked at David and grunted – but Anna nudged her and shook her head.

Alexandra gave her a resentful look. "I wasn't going to say anything," she muttered, from behind her mask. She didn't think Anna was in any position to be worrying about her behavior right now.

Alexandra transmuted the basic elements into a bronze bowl that earned a grudging scowl from Mr. Grue. Anna's bowl was more shapely and symmetrical than Alexandra's, but Grue picked it up and squashed it against the table, and bellowed, "What did I tell you!"

He looked even more annoyed when he could find no fault with the Pritchards' brass rings, even after tugging at them and trying to twist them. As the bell rang to end class, he waved his wand, sweeping all the dust out of the air and into a pile in the corner. Students began pulling off their masks. Someone opened the door, and two pieces of parchment which had been fluttering against the outside of it came flapping in, flying through the air until they were almost plastering themselves against Alexandra and Anna's faces. The two girls snatched the papers out of the air, and read the flying notes which had been dispatched from the Registrar's Office.

"Our electives have been changed!" Alexandra exclaimed indignantly.

"Practical Magical Exercise? But I'm taking Geomancy! My father will be furious!" Anna wailed.

Alexandra saw that a box had been checked, below her revised schedule: 'Junior Regimental Officer Corps (P.M.E. required).'

"We have to go to the gym, now," she groaned.

David, who had chosen P.M.E. in the hopes of making the Quidditch team, accompanied them. Charmbridge Academy had a huge gymnasium, which could be magically converted into anything from an indoor Quidditch field to a broom-and-foot obstacle course to a dueling range. The last class of the day usually saw many students playing sports and games there. P.M.E. was mandatory for all sixth graders; Alexandra saw Tomo Matsuzaka listlessly practicing wand gestures with her classmates under the supervision of Miss Gambola. She looked away quickly, hoping Tomo and Anna would have enough sense to just avoid one another.

"There's Shirtliffe," David said, pointing. "Good luck." He walked over to join the other would-be Quidditch players.

Anna and Alexandra trudged over to where Ms. Shirtliffe, still in her Regimental Officer Corps uniform, was standing in front of about thirty students, including the six Stormcrows from Blacksburg. Charmbridge's JROC company was made up of students of all grade

levels. Most were boys, though Alexandra saw about half a dozen other girls besides herself and Anna.

“Fall in, new wands!” ordered Ms. Shirtliffe.

Alexandra and Anna both stared at her, uncomprehendingly.

Shirtliffe gestured at the four ranks of students standing at attention. “Get in line!”

The two girls shuffled over to stand next to one of the boys in uniform.

“Stand at attention!” Shirtliffe snapped.

Alexandra and Anna stood up a little straighter.

Shirtliffe shook her head. “King, Hawthorne, you're in charge of the new wands. Smith, Franklin, Nguyen, take charge of the other squads.”

“Yes, ma'am!” replied the students she had addressed, and they all made a gesture like a salute, though it was different from what Alexandra had seen on TV.

Most of the kids promptly followed one of the senior JROC students, but Alexandra saw there were four other students besides her and Anna who were 'new wands.' The other four had uniforms already. Maximilian King gave Alexandra another long, unfriendly look, then said, “You'd better take these two to get uniforms, Bea.”

Beatrice Hawthorne nodded. She gestured to Alexandra and Anna. “Come with me.” And when they began following her, she snapped, “Walk in step!”

After walking a dozen paces, Hawthorne pointed her wand at the two girls, who were trying, without much success, to stay in step, and barked, “Gleichschritt!”

Alexandra and Anna stumbled, then found neither of them could take a step unless the other one was stepping with the same foot.

“We use Cadence Charms on new wands who can't even walk properly,” Hawthorne lectured them.

They marched awkwardly through the hallways, always on the verge of falling over, until they reached a room with a sign on it that said, 'JROC Headquarters.'

Despite the officious-sounding name, it appeared to be nothing more than a converted classroom, with several rows of hard wooden chairs, and only one table, sitting in front of a magical whiteboard. A diagram of some sort of broom-flying formation was still written on it, and the small symbols representing brooms and riders were moving about in an animated two-dimensional demonstration. Below the diagram were more notes: 'Physical exercise, 0600. Wand drills/every Tues. Field ex. monthly.' Alexandra eyed these notes warily, and then Hawthorne tapped her wand against a cloakroom door. It opened, and she stepped inside.

“You're expected to maintain your own uniforms,” she told them. “But Charmbridge has loaner outfits you can use for now. They may not fit without tailoring. You'll also need dress shoes, boots, a wand-cord and holster, and your own broom, one that conforms to JROC requirements, which means none of those sport brooms or extra-cushioned, fall-proof lady-brooms.” Hawthorne sneered, as she tossed two bundles at the younger girls.

Alexandra stared down at hers. It was heavy blue-dyed wool, and smelled like it had been lying amidst other musty old cloaks and uniforms for a long time. A leather belt creaked stiffly as she squeezed the contents of the bundle.

“Well? Go ahead and change!” snapped Hawthorne. Alexandra and Anna stared at her.

“You mean, in here?” squeaked Anna.

Hawthorne rolled her eyes. “No one else is going to come in here. Do you want to go to the girls' bathroom?” And when Anna continued staring at her, she snorted and shook her head. “Fine, act like a child.

I'll step outside." The older girl opened the door to the JROC classroom and waited on the other side, in the hallway.

"Dean Grimm isn't really going to make us stay in the JROC, is she?" mumbled Anna, as she and Alexandra began undressing, and unfolded the uniform bundles.

"What do you think?" Alexandra replied glumly. She held her uniform out in front of her. It consisted of blue trousers, a black leather belt with a silver buckle, a blue long-sleeved shirt, and a high-collared blue overcoat with silver around the sleeves and collar. She began putting it on, and found the trousers were too loose on her, so she had to cinch the belt tightly. The shirt fit, though the sleeves were too long, so she had to roll the cuffs back. It was extremely stiff; Alexandra guessed either it had been heavily starched, or some sort of charm had been applied to make it practically able to stand up by itself. The overcoat was no more comfortable; it hung loosely on her, and it was heavy and scratchy. The shoes were hard and uncomfortable.

She turned to Anna, who was looking down helplessly at her coat sleeves. They reached past her fingertips. Her pants were even baggier than Alexandra's, and much too long.

Hawthorne rapped on the door, then reentered the room without waiting for a response. Alexandra found herself resenting how neatly the other girl's uniform fit. It also looked much nicer than the Charmbridge uniforms. Hawthorne had more insignia on hers, and the black crow on her chest looked cool, almost as if it were about to flap its wings and take off.

The Stormcrow shook her head. "You'll have to tailor those. Do it the Muggle way or use charms, it doesn't matter, but you can't walk around school looking like that."

"Guess I won't be able to wear a uniform, then," Alexandra retorted, "since I don't know how to tailor clothes, either the Muggle way or with magic."

“Learn.” Hawthorne gave her a hard stare. “And while we're in uniform, you'll address me as 'ma'am' or 'Witch-Corporal.' Got that, wands?”

“I'm not a wand.” Alexandra stared back.

Hawthorne walked over to Alexandra, until she was looking down at the younger girl.

“Listen, Quick. I know about you, and your reputation. Don't think any of us are thrilled to have a couple of unwilling brats in our company, let alone Abraham Thorn's daughter.”

Alexandra glowered. Everyone at Charmbridge Academy knew who her father was. Of course the BMI students would have heard about her by now as well.

“Colonel Shirliffe seems to think it will be good for you,” Hawthorne continued. “But I guarantee, she'll also make your life hell if you don't lose the attitude. So go ahead and keep being smart. Now pick up your clothes and march.” She pointed towards the door, and Alexandra and Anna sullenly preceded her out of the room, with their 'civilian' clothes now folded up and carried under their arms. Out in the hallway, Hawthorne cast a Cadence Charm again, and they half-marched, half-stumbled their way back to the gymnasium, in their ill-fitting uniforms and dull matte black shoes.

Alexandra didn't smart off to Ms. Shirliffe that day. She and Anna and the other 'new wands' had it hard enough, being forced to do wand drills, which consisted of drawing and sheathing their wands the 'correct' way, rendering proper courtesies to superior officers, and marching, running, and sitting with wands out and in their sheaths. Alexandra couldn't believe how much attention to detail was involved in holding and carrying a wand. She thought it was ridiculous, and worse, boring. Shirliffe commented at one point that every rule had a reason, even if it seemed to be a bunch of needless formality. Alexandra was skeptical.

There were only three other seventh graders and two sixth graders in the JROC. One of the seventh graders had joined last year, which

meant he was now a Mage-Private. All ranked students were called 'mages.' Alexandra, Anna, and the other four youngest were merely 'wands'; they had no rank and, according to the older JROC students, no rights.

"Mages only have to wear their uniforms on drill days," Mage-Sergeant Major Franklin informed them, before dismissing them. "But wands have to wear their uniforms every weekday, during school hours. And stop making faces, Chu. We wear our uniforms every day, too."

It was true; unlike the Charmbridge JROC students, Alexandra had never seen any of the Blacksburg students out of uniform. They also outranked most of their Charmbridge peers of the same grade level. JROC was just an extracurricular activity to the Charmbridge students, but to the Stormcrows, it seemed to be as much a part of their identity as their school.

David teased Alexandra and Anna at first, especially the first morning they arrived at breakfast in their uniforms. "You look like Nazi Girl Scouts," he quipped.

Alexandra glowered. "Not funny." She felt like everyone in the cafeteria was staring at her.

Anna didn't look amused either. "Weren't Nazis bad guys?"

"What's a naught-see?" asked Constance.

David found himself trying to stammer out an explanation, and Alexandra took some satisfaction in the fact that the Ozarkers didn't find the joke funny either, once they got the gist of it.

"I didn't know JROC uniforms came dwarf-sized," snickered Larry, loudly, from his table full of ninth graders, as Alexandra and her friends sat down. Anna turned red. Alexandra almost stood up again, and Anna caught her arm.

"Please don't, Alex!" she whispered in a high voice.

"At ease, Witch-Cretin Quick!" Larry sneered mockingly, and his friends all laughed.

"Don't you let unmannered boys aggerpervoke you," Constance chided. Her disapproving gaze fell on David. He flushed and offered an apologetic grin.

Constance and Forbearance assured the two new wands that they looked quite 'splendant' in their uniforms. David became more sympathetic, and less amused, when they pointed out that they would no longer be able to attend ASPEW meetings, now that the JROC would be taking up so much of their free time.

Older JROC students took extra electives in Confederation history and martial magic. Alexandra and Anna's only JROC obligation on their class schedules was P.M.E., but there were extra drills at least two afternoons per week, and three days a week they had to get up early to exercise at 6 a.m. Ms. Shirtliffe (or Witch-Colonel Shirtliffe, as Alexandra now had to get used to calling her), made them do calisthenics and run around the school. Sometimes she conjured an obstacle course in the gym, and the students had to crawl, climb, roll, jump, and slide their way across precarious constructs made of walls, beams, poles, ropes, and nets. Shirtliffe kept threatening to summon a few Dark creatures to motivate them to run faster or move with more alacrity around the obstacle course. Alexandra was actually curious to see what Dark creatures looked like – or find out if Shirtliffe was bluffing – but she kept her mouth shut and ran, for Anna's sake.

Mage-Sergeant King was in charge of training the younger wands, and he was even harsher than Beatrice Hawthorne and Ms. Shirtliffe combined. He had Anna in tears practically every day. He would stop both girls in the hallway, and dress them down for any deficiencies in their uniforms, right in front of all the passing students. He berated them for their postures, their attitudes, even their hair. (Tomo's hex had left Anna's hair unmanageably frizzy, even after repeated applications of straightening charms and potions.) He was the strongest and the fastest at all physical activities, and he drove the smallest and weakest kids (particularly Anna) mercilessly.

This was worse than Vacation Bible School, Alexandra thought. And it was going to last all semester. She had almost forgotten how much she'd been looking forward to returning to school.

Her week spent doing detention with Ms. Gale was relatively easy. Alexandra was very suspicious of the new custodian at first, but the large, round woman spoke to her very little, and gave her simple chores like polishing the Clockworks, and removing posters and other things stuck to the walls with Glue Charms. Usually she let Alexandra go back to her room by eight o'clock.

On mornings when they had to exercise, Alexandra and Anna returned to their rooms tired, sweaty and dirty, with very little time to shower and dress before breakfast. This led to fights with Darla and Angelique, who always spent too much time in the bathroom in the morning. Darla in particular had become very cold towards them.

Alexandra merely resigned herself to enduring the grueling discipline for the remainder of the year. Anna never stopped being miserable. Alexandra tried to comfort her, but she had to admit to herself that she wished her friend would stop crying and just get used to the running and the marching and the wand drills. They were supposed to start broom drills at the end of the month, which Alexandra hoped at least meant they'd be able to fly.

This was not exactly what Alexandra had been hoping for, when she had started her second year at Charmbridge. But she swore that she was going to persevere, and not get in any more trouble, no matter how tedious the routine.

It was on a Friday evening, halfway through September, that something dramatically interrupted that routine, shattering both her tedium and her vow.

A breeze from outside stirred their room on Charmbridge's second floor. These were the fading days of summer, and soon the weather would turn colder, but for now, Anna and Alexandra still left the window open for their familiars. They were doing their Transfiguration homework together, and they'd sent the birds out after losing two of

the little green tree frogs they'd been given to practice with to Anna's hungry owl.

Alexandra was looking out the window, as Anna blinked away tears of frustration. They were supposed to transform frogs into erasers, and they had a test on Monday. Anna had already received a scathing letter from her father over her schedule change; she was terrified of not turning in good grades at the end of the semester. Right now, there was a small green eraser with legs hopping around on her desk.

“Just calm down and take a deep breath,” Alexandra suggested, for the third time, and before Anna could reply, Charlie came flapping through the window. Alexandra smiled and held out her arm, and her familiar landed on her wrist. Alexandra's smile faded when she saw something shiny clutched in the raven's beak.

“Not again, Charlie, you kleptomaniac!” she shouted, and snatched the object away. Charlie squawked in protest, snapped at her, and then made a long, derogatory croaking sound, while Alexandra frowned and studied the metal disk in her hand. At first she thought Charlie had found a Lion or an Eagle lying on the ground somewhere, but this coin was lighter and didn't look like either Muggle or Confederation coinage. It also had a reddish tint to it.

There was a bird crudely stamped on one side, but not an eagle. It looked more like a crow, or a raven. Alexandra looked up at Charlie suspiciously, and back at the coin. The only other thing on that side were the letters 'MMS,' printed beneath the bird's talons. She flipped it over, and saw an empty septagon on the reverse face, with writing printed along the edge of the coin. Squinting at the tiny letters, she read: “If this coin be stolen, a Thief's Curse be upon you!”

She looked up at the raven again. “Now what have you done, Charlie?” The bird only looked at her reproachfully, and cawed.

The Mors Mortis Society

"So, I'm pretty sure 'MMS' stands for 'Mors Mortis Society,'" Alexandra told her friends the next morning at breakfast. They were all huddled around the table, staring at the reddish-gold disk sitting by her plate. "But I can't figure out what the coin is for, or how Charlie got it."

"It's obvious, isn't it?" said David.

Alexandra gave him a narrow look. "Oh, really?"

"It's an invitation." David leaned closer to examine the coin, but like the others, he refrained from touching it. "They invited you last year, right? But you never showed."

Alexandra tapped the coin with a finger thoughtfully. Back in June, she had received an anonymous invitation to the secretive club's year-end meeting. This was after the entire school had found out about her being Abraham Thorn's daughter. Though intensely curious, she had in the end decided not to go, not wanting to do anything to further her reputation as a 'Dark sorceress.'

"Charlie might have just picked it up because it was shiny," Anna suggested doubtfully.

"So either Charlie found someone else's coin, or they somehow got Charlie to bring it to me?" Alexandra wasn't sure which theory she liked better.

"Guess we'll find out if you're suddenly covered in boils and grow a tail," David joked. Alexandra rolled her eyes at him, but the Pritchards didn't look amused at all.

"This hain't funny!" Constance fumed.

"Who knows what other curses them sorcerers might'a wished on you?" Forbearance whispered.

"You oughter turn that bedeviled coin in," urged Constance.

Forbearance nodded. "And have yourself blessed."

"Blessed?" Alexandra frowned.

"Getting checked for curses wouldn't be a bad idea," Anna agreed. "Although if the coin really did have a Thief's Curse on it, it probably would have affected you already."

"Actually, it would have affected Charlie," Alexandra pointed out. That had worried her a great deal the previous night, and she'd stayed up late keeping an eye on her raven. Nothing had happened, though, and Charlie was still fine this morning, and still annoyed at having the coin taken away.

"Charlie's your familiar," said Constance.

"A curse drawn by a familiar goes to its witch," stated Forbearance.

That made Alexandra frown again. Anna started to disagree with them, which led to an argument about the nature of curses. Alexandra didn't much like the idea that Charlie could go and get her cursed, though she certainly didn't want Charlie cursed either.

Down the table, she noticed Darla and Angelique both giving her dark looks. She raised an eyebrow, with a challenging expression. The two girls just shook their heads and looked away from her, then picked up their trays and got up from the table. Alexandra snorted. Darla had been acting more snotty than usual lately.

If you want to be around Blacksburg students so much, you join the JROC, she thought sourly.

Despite the Pritchards' warning, Alexandra neither turned the coin in nor got rid of it. She knew the Mors Mortis Society was a banned organization, and she didn't really want to join a bunch of misfits practicing Dark Arts. She could not banish her curiosity, however, and when no boils or tails or other curses afflicted her or Charlie after a few days, she decided that either the warning on the coin was a bluff,

or she was meant to have it after all. Exactly what it was good for remained unclear. Anna also thought she should get rid of it, so Alexandra simply didn't mention that she was still carrying it around in her pocket.

As the month wore on, Alexandra still hated getting up before dawn on exercise days, but it was becoming easier, and she was no longer the second-slowest after Anna to finish their morning runs or obstacle courses. Colonel Shirliffe had also promised that once the 'new wands' mastered the basic drills and courtesies, they'd start learning things like tactical movement, on foot and on broom, and basic magical defense. Since Alexandra was still too young to join the Dueling Club, she was looking forward to getting something useful out of all this drilling.

She still hated her uniform, but it looked sharper now than it had at first. Some of the other girls had helped her figure out how to make it fit her better, and Beatrice had grudgingly taught her a Polishing Charm for her shoes. Kids still snickered at the infamous Alexandra Quick wearing a JROC uniform in the hallways, but not when she was around the Stormcrows, who were intimidating enough to make even Larry Albo and his friends shut up. (Girls, on the other hand, giggled and flirted shamelessly with all the Blacksburg boys, but especially Martin and Maximilian.)

Nearly two weeks after Charlie had brought her the mysterious coin, Alexandra felt an unpleasant electric tingle against her thigh as she was getting dressed one morning. She'd already put on her blue uniform trousers and dumped the usual contents of her pockets into them. She finished buttoning her jacket, and then reached into her front pants pocket, and sure enough, when her fingers brushed against the coin, a much stronger jolt went through her. Then it faded immediately.

With a glance at Anna, who was still combing her hair straight (weeks later, the effects of Tomo's hex had not yet completely worn off), Alexandra retrieved the coin from her pocket and looked at it.

The raven's wings were now outstretched, and pointing directly upwards, one fully extended and the other half folded. It made the

bird look very much like a watch face, with its wings representing two hands, indicating twelve o'clock. And beneath the letters 'MMS' was now a new word: 'SABBATH,' next to a tiny crescent that looked like a new moon.

When she flipped it over, she saw that there was a small pinpoint of light on one of the septagon's seven sides. She frowned and held the coin up to her eye, squinting to take a closer look, but couldn't make sense of the light's significance.

"What are you doing?" Anna asked. Alexandra lowered the coin, and Anna's eyes widened when she saw it. "I thought you got rid of that!" she exclaimed in an accusing tone.

Alexandra shrugged. "Nothing happened, so obviously it wasn't cursed."

"That's your idea of testing whether something is cursed or not? Hold onto it and see what happens?"

Alexandra frowned, dropped the coin back into her pocket, and buttoned up the collar of her uniform jacket. "Your shoes are scuffed."

Anna looked down at her black uniform shoes, with a disgusted expression. "What does it matter? They'll find some reason to yell at me anyway." She gave Alexandra a suspicious, worried look, but didn't say anything else as they went to breakfast.

Alexandra puzzled over the coin's message all day. She had to go to the library to look up 'Sabbath,' and discovered that it usually referred to Sunday – except when it referred to Saturday. Or, according to several different traditions, both Muggle and magical, any number of other days throughout the year.

She found this not much more helpful than the lunar chart that Mrs. Minder helped her find after she told the librarian she needed to look up phases of the moon. Alexandra found that in September, the new moon would be waning throughout the coming weekend, but there were lots of other confusing terms, like 'dark moon,' and 'astronomical new moon.'

Frustrated, she wondered who might know more about this subject. She certainly couldn't ask Anna for help with this, and definitely not a teacher. Then she recalled that Darla and Angelique were taking Astronomy and Astrology.

Okay, she thought. It won't be that bad if I ask them a simple question.

She knew her suitemates were really going to enjoy feeling superior to her, though, so when at last she resorted to knocking on their door after class that afternoon, it was with gritted teeth.

Darla opened the door. She and Angelique were both undressing and changing into more comfortable clothes.

"Look at those rolls!" Angelique's jarvey was jeering at her from her cage.

Angelique flinched and ordered, "Be quiet, Honey," as she always did.

"Why don't you put a Silencing Charm on her?" Alexandra asked.

Angelique, who had been pinching her side and examining her excess flesh critically, turned to frown at Alexandra. "I can't keep her Silenced all the time. It's not natural."

"Blazing blue bulls, what an enormous ass!" exclaimed Honey.

Angelique's backside was now turned towards the jarvey's cage, and she scowled and looked over her shoulder. "Shut up, Honey!"

Alexandra shook her head. She didn't think there was anything natural about being insulted by a talking rodent, but Darla demanded impatiently, "What do you want, Alexandra?"

"I was wondering if you know when the Sabbath is." Alexandra looked over her shoulder to make sure Anna hadn't entered their room yet. "And if there's a new moon on the Sabbath or something. I'm just... curious about astrology and stuff."

"Mudblood!" screamed Honey, and Alexandra's expression darkened, until Angelique picked up the jarvey's cage and moved her to the other side of the room.

"Curious," Darla repeated, with a flat, humorless expression. She stared at Alexandra a moment, then shook her head. "You mean you're curious about this?" She picked up something off her dresser and held it up. It was a coin identical to Alexandra's.

Alexandra gaped. "You have one too!"

"So does Angelique." Darla gave her a haughty look. "What, you thought you have to have an infamous Dark wizard as a father to be worthy of an invitation?"

Alexandra narrowed her eyes. "I wasn't even sure it was an invitation. Who gave you yours?"

Darla scowled. "You do realize that the Mors Mortis Society is supposed to be secret, right? I saw you flashing your coin around and telling everyone else about it. I'll bet they won't even let you join now, once they've seen what a blabbermouth you are."

Alexandra scowled back at her. "I didn't tell everyone else."

Darla snorted. "You're about as secretive as Honey." She sounded resentful and smug at the same time. "Everything you do, the whole school knows about it."

"Blabbermouth! Lip-flapping babbling jabberjaw!" screamed the jarvey from across the room.

Alexandra clenched her fists. "If you don't tell me, I'll find out one way or another."

Darla rolled her eyes. "Sunday. It's Sunday at midnight, okay? It's not some big complicated riddle. Even a seventh grader is supposed to be able to figure it out on her own."

"But what about –?" Alexandra started to ask about the little light on the septagon, but Darla shut the door in her face. Behind the door, she heard Honey shout, "Sorceress!"

Alexandra muttered another word for Darla that wasn't much better, and then began removing her uniform. She said nothing about the coin or the meeting of the Mors Mortis Society to Anna when her roommate came shuffling in, looking red-faced and upset after having been held after class for 'remedial training' by Hawthorne and King.

"I'm supposed to polish my shoes, without magic, until I can see my face in them," Anna moaned, pointing at her dull black shoes. "Maximilian said I have to show up for inspection tomorrow morning. Tomorrow is Saturday!"

"You should have polished them when I told you to," Alexandra said.

Anna glared at her. "This is so unfair! I hate the JROC!" She flung herself on her bed, and sulked almost until dinner. Alexandra decided that what she felt like saying, she'd better not, so both of them were quiet until they went to the cafeteria together.

At dinner, she agreed to join Anna and the Pritchards in one of the student recreation rooms that evening. Constance and Forbearance wanted to teach them something called Witches' Whist. David lost interest as soon as he heard the name, and Darla and Angelique both snickered and said that was a game their grandmothers played. Alexandra glared at Angelique and told her to have another roll, with a nasty inflection on the last word. She felt oddly guilty when Angelique flushed, and she realized the other girl had hardly eaten anything for dinner.

"You're not really letting a jarvey tell you you're fat, are you?" she asked.

Angelique didn't take that any better than the crack about rolls. She and Darla got up from the table and stomped away, while Constance and Forbearance gave her one of their disapproving/disappointed looks.

Sighing, Alexandra followed the other three girls out of the cafeteria. The rec room near the seventh graders' dorms was dominated by kids playing board games, reading, doing homework, or fighting over which station to tune the Wizard Wireless to. There were a few Muggle-born kids playing a role-playing game in a corner. Alexandra, Anna, Constance, and Forbearance sat down around a small table, and Constance began dealing cards, while Forbearance explained the rules of Witches' Whist.

Alexandra's mind kept drifting, though, and at one point, while Forbearance was shuffling cards to deal out another set of hands, Alexandra took the MMS coin out of her pocket, holding it under the table so the other girls couldn't see it. She noticed that the little pinpoint of light was still there, but now it was glowing on a different side of the septagon than where it had appeared before. Excited, she tucked the coin back into her pocket before the other girls noticed.

Alexandra still wasn't sure she wanted to have anything to do with the Mors Mortis Society. She did like the idea of learning hexes and curses. She had heard an awful lot about the so-called 'Dark Arts,' and was beginning to suspect a lot of it was either made up, or just spells that adults didn't want kids to know about.

She tossed this around in her mind, while trying to concentrate on the complicated system of bids and tricks that Constance and Forbearance were teaching her. She kept refusing to fold, and the Ozarker girls caught on quickly to her habit of bluffing outrageously, so her major arcana cards turned blank one after another, as her kings and cavaliers and fools marched off the edges of her cards, summoned into the Ozarkers' hands.

She didn't mention the Mors Mortis Society to her friends, of course, but she left the rec room early, saying she had to talk to one of the older JROC mages. Anna frowned at her suspiciously as she went.

Outside, she walked all the way down the hallway, to where it joined the next wing at a bend in the corridor. The Charmbridge Academy building was a septagon, and when Alexandra took the coin out of her pocket again, she saw that sure enough, the little pinpoint of light was now at one of the septagon's corners.

The coin wasn't just an invitation: it gave directions! Alexandra held it in the palm of her hand as she walked back to her room in Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall, noticing the way the little light moved along one segment of the septagon, matching her own movements. She wasn't sure exactly how it would lead her to the Mors Mortis Society's secret meeting place, but she was sure that as midnight on the Sabbath approached, the coin would reveal more. It wasn't until she climbed into bed that night that she realized she'd already decided to go.

Anna's Saturday morning inspection didn't go well. She had diligently polished her shoes, but Maximilian King managed to find half a dozen other things to ding her for, and Anna didn't come back until just before lunch, complaining that she'd been made to spend two hours doing wand drills.

"Well, at least you don't have to do any more JROC stuff until Monday," Alexandra consoled her.

Anna didn't seem to find that comforting. She sniffled as she took off her uniform and threw it on her bed, looking as if she wanted to set it on fire.

"Maximilian is kind of a bully," Alexandra said, trying to empathize with Anna. "All the Stormcrows are."

"They don't pick on you as much anymore," Anna muttered.

I don't cry all the time, Alexandra thought to herself.

Anna was pensive as she put on a casual red and green robe and tied a dark red sash around her waist. "Abraham Thorn went to BMI, didn't he?" she asked quietly.

Alexandra raised an eyebrow. "Yeah. So?"

"Maybe that's why they don't discipline you as much."

Now both of Alexandra's eyebrows went up. "You think Ms. Shirtliffe and the BMI students are going easy on me because of my father?"

she demanded, in disbelief. "I've gotten nothing but crap because of who my father is! Maybe if you'd stop whining and crying about how much JROC sucks, and just deal with it, you wouldn't always be the one they're shouting at!"

Anna stepped back from Alexandra in surprise, her eyes wide. "Why are you shouting at me?" she asked.

"Because I'm only stuck doing JROC along with you because you had to start a fight in the hallway!" Alexandra shouted. "And all I did was disarm you and Tomo!"

"I tried to tell Dean Grimm that!" Anna protested.

"But she didn't listen, did she? Because I'm Abraham Thorn's daughter, so if one of my friends drags me into a fight, I must have been equally responsible! And you think I'm getting special treatment? Oh yeah, I'm getting special treatment all right! I can't even buy underwear without someone from the Wizard Justice Department following me around!"

"What?" Anna blinked, confused. Alexandra had never told anyone else about her encounter with Diana Grimm.

"I'll see you at the Quidditch field," Alexandra muttered, and walked out the door before she lost her temper further.

Charmbridge Academy's Quidditch team was playing a day school from Chicago. Alexandra and Anna had promised David they'd be there, as had Constance and Forbearance. David had invited all of his friends to come see the game, although as a reserve Seeker, he wasn't expecting to do anything more than warm the bench.

Anna showed up just as the game was about to start, but she and Alexandra didn't say much to each other until after the game. Alexandra thought that the aerial maneuvers looked exciting, but she couldn't be bothered to follow the different balls flying around the stadium or keep track of which players on which team were doing what, and she thought it was rather anti-climactic when Charmbridge

Academy trounced the other school for an hour, and then ended the game by capturing the Snitch.

"I'd rather watch a Quodpot game," she admitted, as they walked away from the field and back to the academy. David, although he'd never gotten a chance to play, was still with the team, helping put equipment away.

"Us too," Constance agreed, following along behind Alexandra with her sister.

"We useter watch our brothers play Quodpot," Forbearance said.

The twins noticed Anna walking silently at Alexandra's side, and looked concerned.

"You feelin' out'a heart, Anna?" asked Constance.

Anna shook her head. "I'm fine."

"Did y'all jower 'gain?" asked Forbearance.

"No!" Anna and Alexandra snapped at the same time. The Pritchards stood back, blinking at them.

"No need for temper, then," Constance replied, not sounding convinced.

Alexandra felt uncomfortable at dinner, as Constance and Forbearance were still watching her and Anna. She was glad that David kept talking throughout dinner, making it unnecessary for her to say much. He was coaching the Quidditch game in hindsight, and talking about the Junior Confederation Quidditch League National Championships. Neither Anna nor Alexandra was in a mood to interrupt him, and Constance and Forbearance were too polite to do so.

"...Charmbridge has won the Central Territory championship for the past four years, so we usually go to the nationals," he was saying.

"But we haven't won the Confederation Cup since '99. We keep gettin' beat by Baja or Acadia, or BMI."

Alexandra nodded, not really paying attention. She didn't realize he'd changed the subject until he repeated her name. She looked up at him, embarrassed.

"I asked if you and Anna are coming to our ASPEW meeting tomorrow night. You don't have JROC on Sundays, right?"

Alexandra looked at Anna, and down the table, at Darla and Angelique, who were sitting with some other girls. Alexandra was pretty sure that they were listening.

"I have homework," she said.

"What homework?" David demanded.

"Alchemy. And Wizard Social Studies."

"You can't write three paragraphs about Confederation Cultures by tomorrow night?"

"We'll see," Alexandra muttered guiltily.

"If you don't want to come, just say so." David frowned, then shook his head. "Whatever." He got up from the table and stalked off.

"We oughter go," Constance sighed, after David left. "I think he's let down."

"I don't know." Forbearance looked troubled. "Ma and Pa wouldn't like us fawnchin' about at school."

"You ought to go if you want to," Alexandra told them. "And not just because David wants you to."

"I thought you're for house-elf rights, too," Anna said quietly.

"I am," Alexandra replied. "I'm just not sure that ASPEW wants the same things the elves do."

It wasn't really a lie, but the real reason she didn't intend to go to the meeting wasn't something she wanted to discuss with Anna, and certainly not with the Pritchards. So she spent much of Sunday actually doing her homework, and then avoiding her friends as the evening wore on. After dinner, she hid in the library until closing time, looking at the magical coin every few minutes. By the time seventh graders were supposed to be in their rooms, it had still not revealed any new information. Unable to hide in the library, and afraid she'd be chased out of the rec rooms by older students (who had a later curfew), she was reduced to wandering around the academy and sitting in stairwells, trying to avoid the residential dorms, which all had watchful portraits hanging over their entrances.

Eleven o'clock came and went, and Alexandra began to worry that there was some other message in the coin that she was supposed to have figured out already. She was almost desperate enough to go find Darla and Angelique again, and endure their smug, superior attitudes. She scowled at the coin, flipping it over and over and staring at both sides. She didn't think Darla or Angelique were smarter than her!

And then she saw a little arrow appear next to the septagon. Excited, she sprang to her feet even before inspecting the coin more closely to see where the arrow was pointing. It was just a tiny glowing line with a little arrowhead at one end, alongside the segment with the glowing pinpoint that represented her own location within Charmbridge Academy. It seemed to be indicating that she should go southwest, away from the seventh grade dorms and towards the eighth grade dorms. She frowned a little. How was she supposed to get past the portrait monitoring the entrance to the eighth graders' hallway? Maybe this was part of an initiation test. You had to reach the meeting place without being caught.

When she came around the bend in the hallway and was almost within sight of a portrait of an ugly little wizard with tufts of gray hair around his ears, the arrow on the coin suddenly pointed directly to the right, towards the interior of the septagon. Alexandra looked right,

and saw that there was indeed a small, dark wooden door there. Cautiously, she opened it, and instead of discovering a broom closet, she saw stairs going down.

The arrows on the coin led her downstairs to the first basement level, and around two wings of Charmbridge Academy, before directing her to another set of stairs leading even further down. Alexandra marveled at the ingenuity of the coin's directions. She was both excited and apprehensive. The second basement level wasn't illuminated, so she had to cast a Light spell with her wand. Maybe this was part of the initiation as well. Surely no one afraid of wandering alone in a dark basement would be worthy of joining the Mors Mortis Society. But Alexandra had been in the basements of Charmbridge Academy before. She'd almost been killed there, too, so she was wary. She also wondered what she would do if she ran into an elf, as she had last year. Bran and Poe had told her that most of the elves stayed in the basement; she couldn't imagine the Mors Mortis Society holding gatherings to practice Dark Arts right under the noses of Charmbridge's house-elves.

At the next flight of stairs, she was even more intrigued. How far down did Charmbridge's basements go? She hadn't even seen much being stored on the second sub-basement level. When she reached the third, the corridors were no longer tiled floors and finished walls; it was rough-hewn rock.

She heard footsteps ahead, and saw two other kids turning, with wands raised.

"Look, it's Troublesome!"

Alexandra groaned. She should have known: Stuart Cortlandt and Torvald Krogstad.

"So you got invited, too," she said, stepping closer to them, warily.

"Obviously, the Mors Mortis Society recognizes talent," Torvald said smugly.

"But they only invited Torvald out of pity," Stuart countered.

The two boys pointed wands at each other, until Alexandra snapped, "I'll hex you both if you don't cool it!"

They turned towards her, and Alexandra almost took a step back. Her odds might not actually be so great against two eighth graders who had spent many hours playing hexem, she realized. But then Stuart and Torvald both grinned.

"Come on then," Stuart urged.

"Why don't you lead the way, Troublesome?" Torvald snickered.

Despite her misgivings, she marched forward haughtily, pretending to be unbothered. Walking ahead into the darkness didn't scare her, but she didn't much like having the two pranksters at her back. If they hexed her from behind, she'd just have to get even later, she thought.

The boys merely followed her, though, as she preceded them down the rock passageway, holding her lit wand at the ready. After another dozen paces, they saw more light ahead, and found the way ahead blocked by two figures in dark robes.

"Your invitation?" intoned one of the figures, holding out a hand. He had a hood with a cowl covering his face, so he looked a bit like the Grim Reaper. He sounded like a teenaged boy trying to pitch his voice low and ominous, and Alexandra found the effect a little comical. She managed not to smirk as she held out her coin. The first boy took it, glanced at it, and handed it back to her. Then he held out his hand to Stuart and Torvald, and they both handed over their coins, which were duly examined and handed back. The first sentry stepped back, and the second robed figure came forward, holding a scroll and a quill.

"Before you can join the Mors Mortis Society, you must sign this contract," announced the second boy, also trying to project a deep, booming voice.

Alexandra nodded seriously, though she was beginning to wonder whether the Mors Mortis Society was the wizarding version of a theatrical club. She was a little more impressed when the taller figure

let go of the scroll, and it snapped open in midair and floated there in front of her face.

She read the writing at the top of the scroll, which said: "I solemnly swear that I shall keep the secrets of the Mors Mortis Society, revealing nothing I learn, nor any names of fellow members, to outsiders, even on pain of DEATH!"

She blinked at the last word, written in tall, dark, capital letters and underlined multiple times. Were they serious? There was plenty of empty space on the scroll beneath this pronouncement, but she didn't see any other names written on it.

"Are we the first people to sign?" she asked.

"No," replied one of the hooded figures. "But you can't see any of the other names until you sign it yourself." He handed her the quill.

She looked at it, and frowned. "Don't I need ink?"

The two boys in robes chuckled. "No. You sign in blood."

She scowled at them. "Are you serious?" She looked over her shoulder at Stuart and Torvald, who raised their eyebrows and looked at one another.

"We're very serious," snapped one of the robed figures.

"If you're not willing to take this seriously, then get lost," sneered the other. "But give us back your coin first."

Alexandra narrowed her eyes. "What do you want me to do, cut my finger?"

"It's a Blood Quill!" the first robed figure explained impatiently.

Alexandra wanted to ask what a Blood Quill was, but she heard Stuart and Torvald whispering behind her back. She hated showing ignorance in front of other kids, and she hated showing trepidation even more. So she pressed the point of the quill to the scroll, and

found that the magic suspending the parchment in the air was also making it rigid enough to write on. As she began signing her name, she felt a stinging sensation on her other wrist. Wincing, she held it up, and her eyes widened. A thin red line on her skin traced a duplicate of the 'A' she had just written on the parchment. She looked at the scroll, and saw that the Blood Quill's 'ink' was a dark brownish-red.

"You guys are crazy," she said.

"If you don't want to sign it, then give us the coin and leave," the first of the cowed figures repeated.

She glared at him, and then finished signing her name. Her wrist burned as the stinging spread across it, and when she was done she looked at the bloody signature on her skin. After a few seconds, though, it was already beginning to fade.

The boy who'd given her the Blood Quill took it back, and handed it to Stuart.

"You can go on." The second robed and hooded boy gestured down the hallway. Alexandra glanced at Stuart, who was now taking a deep breath before he began writing his own name on the scroll, and then she turned and walked another few paces down the dark corridor, until she saw a doorway.

She stepped through it, and into a room that looked more like a cave, with a bare stone floor and rock walls even rougher than those of the corridor outside. In the center of the room was a magical fire, burning without fuel and illuminating the faces of about twenty other kids. All of them were turned towards her.

Some of the faces were familiar, though Alexandra didn't know their names. Almost everyone was older than her. The exceptions were Darla and Angelique, sitting together on the other side of the fire. They didn't look surprised to see Alexandra, but their nervousness about being here had drained all the usual smugness out of their expressions.

Then she spotted one younger face she recognized. Standing between two much taller students, almost as if she were trying to hide, was Tomo Matsuzaka. In the firelight, her eyes seemed to be black and pupilless as she regarded Alexandra, and her expression was unreadable. Alexandra just gave her an expressionless look in return, and scanned the gathering one more time.

That's when she realized there was one person staring at her more intently than the rest. She blinked, as she recognized Maximilian King. It was the first time she'd seen the BMI junior out of his uniform, but he was still standing stiffly, almost at attention, and his expression as he regarded her was dark and disapproving.

Threats

Alexandra avoided Maximilian's gaze. Who is he to be criticizing me for being here? she thought. No one was talking, so she just continued looking around, as Stuart and Torvald came through the doorway behind her.

"Is this everyone?" one of the older girls in the room asked.

"I think so," replied one of the older boys who had been out in the corridor, as he came up behind Torvald and Stuart. He held up the scroll, which Alexandra could now see was full of names, where before she had only been able to see her own.

A tall, round-faced boy with a dark complexion and long black hair stepped forward. "Welcome to this year's first meeting of the Mors Mortis Society," he announced. "About half of you are new, and not all of you will make it through initiation, which is why you don't see a lot of our senior members here. They don't want to show their faces to newbies, despite the contract you just signed."

He and the girl who had just spoken joined the two robed figures, while everyone else looked at each other. Alexandra rubbed her wrist and frowned. Initiation? So far, she was not impressed by all this theatricalism.

"You may have seen us around school," the older boy continued. "Some of you probably know each other as well." He nodded at all the prospective new members. "Remember that outside of these meetings, we don't talk about the Mors Mortis Society. We learn magic that's forbidden at Charmbridge, because the Confederation is governed by outdated, puritanical laws. Your teachers will tell you that certain magic is 'Dark' or 'evil,' but they'll never tell you why some curses are forbidden, and others aren't. The truth is, most so-called 'Dark magic' just has a stigma on it, either because it's non-traditional, or because somewhere in history, some wizard used that magic to do bad things."

He scanned the room, as did Alexandra. Most of the other kids looked eager or nervous, or both. Stuart and Torvald had excited,

curious expressions, and Darla was sitting up straight now, eyes fixed on the boy who was speaking. Angelique still looked uncertain. Tomo remained stone-faced, and Maximilian – Alexandra blinked when she glanced at him and found that he was still staring at her. She scowled back at him, and he frowned and looked away.

The two boys in robes had now pushed their hoods and cowls away. Alexandra recognized one boy as someone she'd seen on the Quidditch team the day before. The other one was pulling something from beneath his robes. It looked like a very old, worn stone bowl, embedded with shiny flakes of some other mineral, like mica. He gestured at Darla and Angelique and the other kids standing next to the magical fire. "Move out of the way," he commanded.

They did so, and only then did Alexandra see that the rock wall behind them was much flatter and smoother than the rest of the room's interior, and that it was decorated with paintings. Alexandra could barely see the brown, red, black, and yellow figures in the flickering light from the fire, but they had a jagged, primitive appearance that she associated with Indian art, at least from what she'd seen in books. There were several human-like figures, engaged in activities that might have been running, hunting, fighting, or perhaps just standing around talking. There was also a fearsome-looking bird, and some four-legged creatures that might have been bears or large cats, as well as a number of other, more abstract designs.

Alexandra didn't know what to make of this, but she was pretty sure neither the paintings nor the stone bowl had been created by Charmbridge students.

The boy holding the bowl knelt and set it on the ground in front of the wall with the paintings on it, and then drew a small knife. With a grimace, he made a long, shallow cut across his palm, then held his hand over the bowl, clenching it into a fist while blood dripped into the bowl. The girl who had spoken before was now untying a small leather pouch, and began pouring black sand in a semicircle in front of the wall.

Everyone watched. Some kids were murmuring to each other, especially when the boy with the bowl cut his hand. Maximilian folded his arms and looked on, with an expression bordering on contempt.

The two Mors Mortis members stepped back, careful not to disturb the line of black sand, and then the girl held out her wand – while the boy, Alexandra noticed, was casting a quick healing charm on his hand.

“Ata'iyē chindu nayake ha tepwen ata'ehi,” intoned the girl. Alexandra guessed it was an Indian language, though the girl, with pale freckled skin and long blonde hair, looked about as non-Indian as could be.

The other three Mors Mortis Society members all began chanting now: “Su-su na! Su-su na! Su-su na! Su-su na!” Alexandra almost found it comical – until she saw the painted figures on the stone wall begin moving. They squirmed and scattered out of the way, and the rock on which they were painted turned dark, as if a shadow had passed over it, and then darker still, until it was a black void, like a starless sky. As this happened, everyone heard another sound, replacing the chanting of the students as they fell silent. It was low, deep, almost subliminal, something halfway between a whisper and a moan. It issued forth from the dark space where the rock wall had been, and was joined by other voices, all of them whispering and chanting and murmuring tonelessly. Alexandra blinked and looked around, because if she didn't concentrate on it, she could almost imagine she wasn't really hearing anything. The expressions of everyone else in the room showed the same confusion and unease that she felt.

Then something came out of the darkness.

Darla and Angelique weren't the only ones to jump and squeal. Alexandra even saw Tomo gasp. She felt her own heart beat faster a moment, as a dark shade drifted into the room, and hovered there over the bowl, without seeming to notice it.

Alexandra got the impression of a face and form that was human, though she couldn't precisely see it. It was like looking at black smoke in the darkness. More than the human-like figure, though, she

sensed something else, as its eyes – what she supposed must be eyes, in what she supposed must be a face – scanned the room.

Ill will. That was the feeling Alexandra got, like a cold breeze blowing across all of them. She saw others shuddering as well and averting their gazes. Whatever entity the Mors Mortis Society had summoned, it was not friendly.

It drifted to and fro, while the students muttered and shivered, but it seemed bounded by the line of black sand. Then the blonde girl pointed her wand.

“Anathema jibay!” she declaimed, and the smoky black figure was sucked back into the void. She waved her wand again, and the blackness faded to stone gray, the wall became solid again, and the painted figures returned to their previous places.

Everyone was quiet for a moment. Then the girl turned and smiled at them – looking triumphant and, Alexandra thought, a little relieved.

“They won't tell you, in Magical Theory classes or even in Advanced Thaumaturgy, that you can do things like that,” she said softly. “What you just saw was a portal to the Lands Beyond. We just conjured a spirit. And I sent it back.”

The tall, long-haired boy who'd spoken before nodded. “We can't give you textbooks or scrolls to study. Too dangerous that they might be found. There's some stuff in the library that Mrs. Minder only allows students from the Advanced Wizardry classes to check out, with permission from a dean, but even those books are censored. So here, you have to learn by watching and repeating, and by experimenting on your own. Carefully! You all know that if you get caught, practicing Dark Arts is grounds for expulsion from Charmbridge. We lose a student or two every year who gets careless.” He looked around at the group, almost accusingly.

“That's all you get to see tonight. Keep an eye on your coins. The next meeting will be within two weeks, and next time, you'll all do a real divination. Some of you will, anyway. And you'll see things that might make you think twice about staying in the Mors Mortis Society.”

The leaders of the group smiled knowingly, except for the boy who had cut himself with the knife. He was now retrieving the bowl and cleaning his blood out of it with a jet of water from his wand. The girl looked at everyone else. "Take off, in groups of twos and threes. Go in different directions, and remember, don't be coming up to me in the hallway and asking stupid questions like when's the next meeting!"

People nodded, and then began trickling out of the room. Stuart and Torvald left together, whispering excitedly to one another. Tomo followed a couple of older students out, not looking at Alexandra. Alexandra waited until Darla and Angelique were leaving, and then fell in alongside them. Neither of them looked thrilled, but they didn't say anything until Alexandra asked, "What was that they summoned?"

"A spirit," Angelique replied. "Like he said."

"Well, duh. But, I mean, was it a ghost?"

"No." Angelique shook her head. "I've met ghosts. Some of my family still haunts our estate."

Darla nodded. "Ghosts are just people who are dead and haven't moved on. That was... something else."

Alexandra frowned, wanting to question Angelique more about ghosts, and not sure whether she believed her, when a voice behind them barked, "Quick!"

All three girls turned around, to see Maximilian King striding down the dark corridor after them, alone. Darla let out a little gasp, and Alexandra wondered if her silly friend had a crush on Maximilian too now.

When he caught up to them, he glared down at them with the same commanding scowl he used during JROC drills. Darla and Angelique took a step back. Alexandra stood her ground and glowered at him.

"None of you should be here," he growled.

Angelique looked down, cowed. "We just want to learn advanced magic."

"Do they teach these things at BMI?" Darla asked breathlessly.

Maximilian turned to her, and his scowl deepened. "No." He looked back at Alexandra. "You don't belong here. None of you do. That magic they're playing with is dangerous."

"So you're going to quit?" Alexandra retorted. "Good."

"Don't give me any of your lip, Quick!" he snapped.

"I may have to do what you say when we're in uniform, Max, but we're not now." Alexandra glared at him. "Who are you to be telling us what we should and shouldn't do? You're not supposed to be here either!"

He raised a hand and pointed a finger at Alexandra. "I don't want to see you at any Mors Mortis Society meetings again."

"Or what?" Alexandra sneered. "You'll tell Colonel Shirtliffe?"

The older boy shook his head. "Listen to me. These idiots have no idea what they're messing with. That was Indian magic, mixed with Dark Arts nonsense they probably got out of some book written by a crackpot. They have about as much of a clue what they're doing as a Muggle waving a wand!"

"So you're an expert on the Dark Arts?" Alexandra snorted. Behind her, Angelique and Darla's eyes were wide.

"No," Maximilian replied, shaking his head slowly. "But I know the difference between wizards who are dangerous because they actually know what they're doing, and stupid kids who are dangerous because they don't."

"I guess being sixteen makes you a grown-up, then?" Alexandra asked sarcastically. "Thanks for your concern." She turned away, and looked at her friends expectantly, urging them to resume walking,

when Maximilian grabbed her arm. She struggled to pull away from him, and reached for her wand when his grip tightened.

"I mean it, Quick!" he warned. "Don't come back, or else!"

"Let go of me!" she shouted, and he did, looking annoyed. She had her wand out, and then saw that his was in his other hand. She hadn't even seen him draw it. He was holding it loosely at his side, though, as he frowned at her.

She tucked her wand back into her belt, and shook her head.

"C'mon," she muttered to Darla and Angelique, and they followed her to the stairs. Darla looked back over her shoulder twice.

Alexandra was very quiet when she snuck back into her room. Her roommate appeared to still be fast asleep even as she undressed and went to bed, but the next morning, Anna asked her, "What were you doing last night?"

It was Monday morning, and the sun hadn't risen yet. Charlie squawked in protest at being woken up, then tucked a head back under a dark wing, while the girls got dressed. The two of them were putting on the long gray pants, shapeless gray shirts, and blue jackets they had to wear for morning JROC exercise.

"Nothing," Alexandra replied. "I was just up late studying."

Anna gave her a narrow look. Alexandra was about as likely to stay up late studying as she was to take the Good Witch's Pledge, and they both knew it. "Fine," Anna said, a little curtly. "But I hope whatever you're doing isn't going to get you into trouble." She walked stiffly out of their room, and Alexandra followed with a sigh.

The late September morning was cold, and their lungs burned as they ran two laps around Charmbridge's seven-sided exterior. Ms. Shirliffe, wearing exercise clothes as well, was easily running ahead of all of them and calling cadence. Alexandra no longer had to fall behind everyone else, but she usually did to run alongside Anna.

“Pick it up, Quick and Chu!” yelled Maximilian from behind. This morning, he and Martin were the ones delegated to bring up the rear and keep stragglers moving. “If the other girls can keep up, so can you!”

Alexandra gritted her teeth, and whispered, “Just a little faster,” to Anna. But Max was right on their heels, yelling relentlessly and calling them slow and lazy. When they finished running and began calisthenics, Maximilian was still behind them, and every time Anna flagged, he yelled at her some more.

Anna was tired and out of sorts all day, but their wand drills that afternoon were just as bad, as Maximilian made her and Alexandra repeat the same 'flick and extend' pattern over and over again. Then he made them both hold their wands straight out in front of them until their arms were shaking.

On Wednesday, they did broom drills. Alexandra was actually becoming fond of these, as they got to fly, and while flying in formation and turning, banking, or changing altitude on command wasn't very exciting, it did improve her control over the broom. Anna, however, was as awkward and unenthusiastic in the air as she was on the ground, which earned her even more reprimands from Maximilian. Even Ms. Shirtliffe was beginning to notice Maximilian's zealousness, as she frowned at him a few times.

Alexandra no longer had any doubts that he was singling her out – and Anna too, because Anna was her friend. He kept both of them after class every day, criticizing every smudged button and loose thread on their uniforms, and made them do wand and broom drills over and over. If Anna had hated JROC before, she now loathed it with every fiber of her being, and approached every morning exercise and afternoon drill as if she were going to a public flogging. It was clear that Maximilian King was going out of his way to make the two of them miserable, and the other JROC students and Ms. Shirtliffe weren't going to do anything to stop him.

“It's like he hates us especially,” Anna whined, returning to their room one afternoon, after being told she had yet another Saturday inspection. This time, so did Alexandra. She was sure that Maximilian

was trying to intimidate her, and would probably become even more unbearable as the next Mors Mortis Society meeting approached. Her coin had begun tingling that afternoon.

This time, the coin said in small letters, 'Venus Rising,' and the bird's wings once again indicated twelve o'clock. Alexandra was determined to figure out what day 'Venus Rising' meant without asking Darla and Angelique again, which meant another trip to the library. Consequently, she was hardly paying attention to Anna's complaints. Anna sensed this, which made her sulky for the rest of the night. They didn't speak much the next morning, as they stood outside at attention while Maximilian King and Tybalt Franklin inspected their uniforms.

"Smudge on your lapel button," said Maximilian, leaning close to scrutinize Alexandra. Then, when Alexandra glared at him, he barked, "Eyes straight ahead! You've been doing this for weeks now, Quick! You shouldn't be such a slow learner!"

Alexandra bit her tongue. Next to Maximilian, Tybalt was giving Anna a somewhat less stringent inspection. He looked bemused and a little annoyed at being here on a Saturday himself.

"The knot on your cloak is sloppy," he said, tugging on a loose cord. Anna trembled as her cloak slipped off her shoulders and fall to the ground. "The creases on your pants aren't straight. Learn to iron properly. And tie your hair."

Maximilian shook his head. "I knew Charmbridge's JROC flight was hexed, but these kids are the most lazy and undisciplined little brats I've ever seen."

Alexandra's eyes smoldered. All Maximilian could find wrong with her uniform was a smudged button. She was doing her drills just fine, and they both knew it.

As if to challenge that self-assessment, Maximilian commanded, "Wands out."

Tybalt looked at him. "Max, do you really want to spend all Saturday drilling these two?"

Alexandra was very conscious of all the other kids spreading out across the lawn and the exercise fields. Lots of students were taking advantage of one of the few weekends they had left before the weather would turn too cold for outdoor sports. This meant that the hazing she and Anna were enduring was now a public spectacle, and sure enough, she saw Larry Albo watching from the Dueling Range, with a smirk.

"I'm tired of being embarrassed in front of Colonel Shirtliffe," Maximilian replied. "You can take off if you like, Sergeant Major. I'll take responsibility for them."

Tybalt frowned, then shrugged. "All right. Pierce and I were thinking of flying down into the valley, with a couple of girls." He winked. "If you can find one to bring along, you could join us."

"Thanks. We'll see." Maximilian kept his eyes fixed on Anna and Alexandra. Tybalt shook his head again, then pivoted and marched away, back to his room to change out of his uniform.

"Now I'm missing a chance to spend time with my friends on a Saturday, because you two are so pathetic," snapped the older boy.

"I guess you'd rather spend your time with us," Alexandra sneered. She was supposed to stand at attention, and speaking out of turn was strictly forbidden, but her patience had finally snapped.

Maximilian stared at her, then snorted. "Yes, I like nothing better than wasting time with twelve-year-old girls."

"Maybe you do," Alexandra shot back. "Maybe you're a pervert like Martin!" Beside her, Anna gasped.

His face colored with anger. "You and your little friend are the ones with perverted imaginations. But since you can't even stand at attention properly, let's do something a little more demanding. Go get brooms from the locker."

Anna groaned, while Alexandra just glowered and did as she was told. Maximilian wasn't supposed to make them do broom drills; either Colonel Shirtliffe or a senior JROC officer was supposed to be present. But she figured flying would be less dull than wand drills.

Maximilian had them do all the standard flight patterns: four-square, eight-point, five-by-five, and seven-up, three-down. They did each one at least ten times, and then Maximilian said, "Maneuvers!" He ascended on his own broom, and led them high above the school. Anna began to look nervous.

"We're not supposed to go this high," she whispered.

"Just follow me," Alexandra said.

Maximilian began leading them in a series of tight turns and rapid descents, and then made them repeat the circuit while holding their wands at the ready, thus holding onto their brooms with only one hand. Then he led them into the woods, and made them perform maneuvers while avoiding trees.

"We haven't even practiced this!" Alexandra shouted at him. She wasn't having any trouble keeping up with him, but she had slowed down to fly alongside Anna, who looked pale.

The Stormcrow braked to a halt. "What happens to your bravado when you don't have an audience, Quick?" he sneered.

She felt anger rising. "You don't know anything about me!"

He snorted, then gave her a calculating smile. "Tell you what. If you can keep up with me on one flight across the forest to the valley and back, I'll release you and Chu until Monday. Otherwise, we'll be spending the rest of today and tomorrow, doing more drills."

"You really have nothing better to do on a weekend?"

He folded his arms. "Well?"

Alexandra looked at Anna, who was chewing her lip.

"Fine," she agreed, turning back to Maximilian. "What if I beat you?"

"That will be a cold day in hell!" he laughed, and took off.

"I don't like this, Alex," Anna objected, but Alexandra waved to her, and followed Maximilian.

As she leaned forward to push her broom to catch up to the older boy, her irritation was quickly banished by adrenalin. She and Maximilian raced through the forest, staying above ground level but below the tree tops, so the changing fall leaves went rushing past above and below them in a red-orange blur. They weren't deep into the woods, and the trees weren't as dense near the edge of the forest, but they still had to do a lot of darting and swerving to avoid collisions.

She had pushed to the back of her mind questions about Maximilian King's motives, until he suddenly dropped back, giving up his head start, to fly alongside her.

"I don't want you going to any more Mors Mortis Society meetings!" he shouted at her.

"What?" she exclaimed. They weren't yet flying at top speed, but the wind was rushing past them fast enough to make conversation difficult, and she had to keep her eyes ahead of her to avoid running into a tree. "Is that why you're giving me such a hard time?"

"You're too young to be meddling in the Dark Arts!"

"Oh, and you're not?" A large oak loomed ahead, and there was a break in the conversation as Alexandra veered around it one way, and Maximilian veered the other, and the two of them met again at the end of two long parallel arcs on the other side of the tree, then both rolled together to avoid hitting yet another one.

"You can't tell me what to do!" she yelled at him. "Not unless you plan to tell on yourself as well!"

He glowered at her. "Do as I say, or you'll be sorry."

"What is your obsession with me, anyway? Why aren't you warning Darla and Angelique away, or Tomo?" She dipped suddenly, and glared at Maximilian, as he had almost nudged her into a tree with his proximity.

He shook his head. "Those girls will quit soon enough. They're not what the Mors Mortis Society is looking for."

"And I am? You know what? Maybe you're afraid I'll be better at it than you are – just like I'm better at flying than you are!" She suddenly leaned forward and gripped her broom tightly, zipping ahead of Maximilian. The great river valley that separated Charmbridge Academy and the surrounding forest from the Muggle world loomed ahead, and she shot out of the trees, paused for a second to admire the stunning view from high above, even more remarkable than when seen from the Invisible Bridge, and then pivoted in place and dived back into the forest.

Maximilian was right behind her, and then he was ahead of her, and Alexandra gritted her teeth as she tried to catch up. But her boasting notwithstanding, she wasn't better than him. She thought she was a pretty good flier, but he had obviously spent many more years than her riding a broom, and he seemed to have a fearless streak of his own. Alexandra pushed her broom to its limits – which unfortunately, were not that impressive, for a student loaner broom – but while the trees whipped past her on either side, Maximilian stayed firmly ahead.

She could see light through the trees, where the edge of the forest met Charmbridge's fields, and Anna was waiting, when her broom suddenly veered to the right. She pulled up and leaned over, trying to steer back on course, and for one instant thought she saw Maximilian holding his wand, before the trunk of a tree rushed at her and knocked her out of the air.

Alexandra didn't remember being carried to the infirmary. She woke up there, with a splitting headache, and worse pain running from her shoulder down to her wrist. Her arm was splinted, and she felt bruised all over.

The school nurse, Mrs. Murphy, a large, middle-aged woman with red hair, was stirring something, and smiled when Alexandra opened her eyes.

“Don't try to move your arm, Miss Quick. It's broken in two places, along with your wrist and collarbone. You also have a great big lump on your head. You'd probably have fractured your skull if it wasn't so thick.”

“Oh,” Alexandra groaned, not amused.

Mrs. Murphy poured the concoction she was stirring into a large mug. “I want you to drink all of this,” she instructed. “It tastes awful and you won't want to get it down, but it will mend your bones. So make faces all you want, but you are going to drink it.”

“Okay,” Alexandra sighed. She took the mug in one hand, with the nurse standing over her, in case she lost her grip, and sniffed the contents suspiciously. She couldn't smell anything, so she took a swallow, and almost choked.

Mrs. Murphy patted her back, as Alexandra gagged and struggled not to spit the potion back up. “I warned you. Just swallow it all down as quickly as possible.”

Alexandra thought that if you liquefied earwax, laundry detergent, and a pound of beetles, it would taste something like this. She decided not to ask what was really in it – she was afraid the actual ingredients might be even worse. She couldn't help but make a horrible face as she brought the mug back to her lips and swallowed as much as she could between large, shuddering gasps of breath. Mrs. Murphy nodded with approval and took the mug from her after she drained the last of it.

“Will my arm heal overnight?” Alexandra croaked, still trying not to gag, as the potion coated the inside of her mouth and throat. Her stomach was heaving.

“Not entirely. It's the collarbone that's going to take a while. I expect you won't be doing drills for a few days. But if you rest properly, you might be able to leave the infirmary tomorrow.” With that, Mrs. Murphy went over to check on a tenth grader with a nasty outbreak of tentacular growths on his face.

The only visitor Mrs. Murphy allowed that evening was Ms. Shirliffe, who briefly inquired how Alexandra was feeling, and then asked, “Would you like to tell me what happened, Miss Quick?”

Alexandra started to shrug, which was a mistake. “Mage-Sergeant King was having me and Anna do broom drills,” she gasped, trying not to let the pain show on her face. “And I flew into a tree.”

“There's no reason for you to have been doing broom drills in the woods.” Taking in Alexandra's pale face, Shirliffe shook her head and told Alexandra she would be excused from exercises and drills for the following week, though she still had to wear her uniform during school hours. The teacher wore a grim expression as she left the infirmary.

After dinner had been taken away that night, Alexandra began nodding off, since she had nothing else to do. A pair of popping sounds woke her up, and then she sat up when she saw a pair of elves at the foot of her bed.

“Bran, Poe!” she whispered, looking in the direction of Mrs. Murphy's office. “Hi!”

“We heard Alexandra Quick was hurt again,” said Bran.

“We hopes Alexandra Quick isn't going to be getting herself in danger again,” said Poe. Both of the library elves were wringing their hands.

Alexandra felt a surge of affection for the two elves, who had been such good friends to her, even bringing her dinner when she'd been in the infirmary last year.

“Nah,” she assured them. “It was just an accident.” She was trying to hold still – her collarbone might be mending, thanks to Mrs. Murphy's

potion, but any movement sent a fiery wave of pain through her shoulder. Bran and Poe's eyes went wide when they saw her grimace.

"We was wrong to wake Alexandra Quick up," Bran moaned guiltily.

"No, I'm glad to see you," she insisted. "And I told you before, you can call me Alex." She smiled at the elves, and they smiled back.

She leaned forward, cautiously, so as not bump her arm or jostle her shoulder again, and whispered, "Actually, if you could do me a big favor... I'm really bored here. I don't even have any books to read."

Their eyes lit up. The library elves had a profound love for books, and for humans who loved books. Alexandra's bibliophile tendencies had won their affection and their loyalty, and had even led them to violate library rules on her behalf. It wasn't something she liked to take advantage of, but she knew they wouldn't mind bringing her some perfectly harmless books about astronomy. They didn't need to know why she was so interested in Venus.

The bone-healing potion was very effective, but not without side effects. Alexandra found she was unable to do much reading that night, as it felt like her bones were being mended with the help of hot irons. Mrs. Murphy brought her another potion which dulled the pain and helped her sleep, so it wasn't until after breakfast on Sunday that she was finally able to turn to the books Bran and Poe had brought her.

The astronomy books Alexandra had seen before were dry and not very helpful, but the elves had brought her some of the more expensive volumes kept on reserve in the Charmbridge library. These had animated charts and graphs, showing the movements of the stars and planets, and were able to tell you anything you wanted to know about the positions of heavenly bodies at any given moment, with as much accuracy as a Muggle computer. The problem was that the books only recognized very specific commands, which meant that like a Muggle computer, they required a certain amount of expertise to extract any useful information.

By lunchtime, though, Alexandra had Venus and Earth floating in front of her, hovering over the open pages of Esther Sextans' Star Almanac.

Venus, apparently, would be a 'rising sign' at midnight on Tuesday, and no other midnights for the next three weeks. So the next Mors Mortis Society meeting must be Tuesday night, Alexandra concluded triumphantly.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Anna's voice: "If you're so interested in astronomy, why didn't you take it as an elective?"

Alexandra looked up, and smiled to see Anna, David, Constance, and Forbearance, all of them bringing food and snacks from the cafeteria.

"It wouldn't have mattered anyway, would it?" she pointed out, as she hastily closed the book. Anna grimaced.

"Oh, Alexandra, your face looks a fright!" Constance exclaimed.

"It does?" Alexandra hadn't seen herself in a mirror since the accident.

Anna nodded. "The side of your head is one big swollen bruise."

"I thought you were a good flier!" David snorted.

Alexandra glared at him, while Constance and Forbearance tsked and shook their heads.

"It was all Max's fault!" Anna declared. Then she grinned at Alexandra. "You missed seeing him get chewed out by Ms. Shirtliffe!"

"Really?" Alexandra sat up, taking some pretzels from the bowl David offered to her.

"She was pissed!" Anna chortled gleefully. Constance and Forbearance winced, but Anna continued. "She had him standing at attention outside in front of everyone while she yelled at him for ten minutes! He's got detention for a week, and he lost a stripe, too!"

“How did Ms. Shirtliffe know what happened?” Alexandra asked. “You didn't tell her, did you?”

Anna looked offended. “Of course not!” She shrugged. “When she asked, he admitted it. He didn't even argue or defend himself.”

“Good,” Alexandra muttered. She wondered if he'd admitted using his wand on her. The way she'd lost control of her broom was awfully suspicious. Had he sent her flying into a tree on purpose? Maybe to teach her a lesson? Perhaps he hadn't meant for her to be injured so seriously. She didn't think Maximilian actually wanted to kill her – but then, she had never suspected Ben Journey of wanting to kill her. At least she knew Maximilian was too young to be a member of the Thorn Circle.

Maximilian's punishment wasn't really much comfort, though, and she didn't share in Anna's glee. He was still going to be in charge of them, and she'd still have to see his accusing face when she went to the Mors Mortis Society meeting.

But the presence of her friends cheered her enormously, as had the visit from Bran and Poe. They talked David into joining them for a game of Witches' Whist, and then David insisted on teaching them poker. Constance and Forbearance were reluctant, but he pointed out that it was very popular among Muggles. They gambled with pretzels, peanuts, and cookies, until Mrs. Murphy finally shooed the other four kids out so she could check how well Alexandra had healed.

“Well, I'd really like to keep you for another night or two,” she tutted, probing Alexandra's collarbone with her fingers, and then squeezing her elbow lightly. Each touch elicited a wince of pain, but the prospect of staying longer in the infirmary was enough to keep Alexandra from admitting to any other discomfort. “I feel fine, honest!” she protested.

The nurse shook her head and bent her patient's wrist slightly. Alexandra forced herself not to flinch. “You can hardly move your arm. It will need to stay in a sling.”

“I'll manage.”

“Very well, Miss Quick. I want to see you every morning until I take the sling off.”

Going to see Mrs. Murphy was less onerous than going to do morning exercises, as Anna was quick to point out. Alexandra still had to get into her uniform though, which she couldn't do without her roommate's help, so she refrained from asking Anna whether she'd rather be the one in a sling.

By Tuesday, her arm wasn't out of the sling yet, but the purplish bruise covering the side of her face had mostly faded. (Larry Albo had commented aloud in the halls that her head looked like a big, bruised witch-berry.) Alexandra did her homework early that night, and once again pretended to go to sleep, waiting until Anna's breathing had become soft and regular, before she got out of bed, slowly and carefully, and slipped into sweat pants, a t-shirt, and slippers – the only clothes she could easily get on without help. She tucked her wand into the large pocket in her sweat pants, and took the MMS coin with her as she crept out of her room.

Once again, she had to sneak around the portraits monitoring dormitory hallways, though fortunately, the old wizard hanging over Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall had a habit of falling asleep after curfew. When she looked at the pinpoint of light on the back of her coin, the little arrows took her in a different direction than last time. Instead of heading downstairs into the basements, she was going up – past the fourth floor, and then into the vast, labyrinthine attic that reached all the way around Charmbridge Academy.

She had been here, too, last year. She'd been lost in the attics, once, just as she'd been lost in the basements, and in both cases, Ben Journey had made an attempt on her life. Alexandra wasn't easily spooked, but she did feel a heightened sense of wariness as she moved through one dusty room after another, and while she held the coin in her injured hand, the hand not in a sling stayed close to her wand.

Going up one short set of stairs, she heard footsteps, and her fingers wrapped around her wand. Emerging into a narrow hallway, she almost bumped into Tomo Matsuzaka, who gasped in surprise, and

then took a step backwards, her face turning even more pale when she recognized Alexandra.

Alexandra looked down at the Japanese girl. Her eyes narrowed in suspicion, as she wondered why this sixth grader was in the Mors Mortis Society. She let go of her wand, dropping it back into her pocket, and then abruptly grabbed Tomo with her good hand, pushing the smaller girl against the wooden wall behind her.

“Just so you know,” she said, in a low voice, “Anna has friends. Lots of friends. And if you do anything else to her – if you cast one hex at her – you're going to be hurt a lot worse than this.” She held up her other arm, in its sling.

Tomo stared up at her, her dark eyes angry and indignant.

“Don't you dare use any curses we learn from the Mors Mortis Society on Anna,” Alexandra whispered. “If anything happens to her – anything –” She shook Tomo, making the other girl squeal a little – “I'll assume you did it, and I'll turn you inside out! Understand?”

Tomo swallowed, but didn't answer. Her face was expressionless now, but it had gone white.

Alexandra suddenly felt uncomfortable, looming over a girl so much smaller than her. But Tomo had started the feud with Anna, she told herself, and she suspected the sixth grader might have joined the Mors Mortis Society for exactly that reason. Nobody was going to use any Dark magic on Alexandra's friends.

She let go of the other girl, and continued towards the light she saw at the end of this hallway. Tomo followed, several cautious paces behind her.

Snakes in the Grass

Most of Charmbridge's attics were full of old furniture, broken pieces of Clockwork golems, moldering books, ancient brooms whose charms had worn off, and other accumulated junk, but the Mors Mortis Society had either found, or cleared out, an empty space. Almost thirty kids were crowded into the large room at the end of the hall. The light came from half a dozen lit wands.

A pair of students wearing those ridiculous hooded robes and cowls – Alexandra couldn't tell whether they were the same boys as last time – were standing by the door. She saw several older kids who hadn't been at the previous meeting. The tall boy and the girl who had done most of the talking last time stood in the center of the room, waiting. None of them had introduced themselves yet, but during the week, Alexandra had asked careful questions of older students, and learned that the long-haired, dark-skinned boy was named John Manuelito, and the blonde girl was Sue Fox. They were both seniors.

Maximilian was there already, and he looked extremely unhappy to see Alexandra. She glared at him defiantly.

Darla and Angelique were the last to arrive; they came rushing in, almost out of breath.

"In the future, if you're late, you won't be allowed in," Sue warned them. The two girls looked chastened, and stood next to Alexandra.

John drew his wand and conjured a table in the middle of the room, which Alexandra knew was fairly advanced magic, but certainly nothing spectacular. Sue then produced an old brazier, which she set on the table. It appeared to be made of bronze, and had some inscriptions running along its edges, but it was otherwise unremarkable. She next pulled out a small pouch, and from it dumped several lumps of hardwood charcoal into the brazier.

"This is a Mayan Brazier of Visions," she announced. "It allows you to see the future."

Everyone looked interested, as Sue ignited the charcoal and brought it to a red-hot glow with her wand. Alexandra watched skeptically. A 'Mayan Brazier of Visions' sounded like some powerful, ancient artifact, but she wondered how a bunch of students had gotten hold of such a thing if it were really that impressive.

"It's old and powerful, and like a lot of old, powerful magic, it takes more than an incantation and a gesture to invoke its gifts," the older girl continued. White, slightly fragrant wisps of smoke were curling out of the charcoal blocks now.

She stared into the glow, and then John offered, "I'll do it if you don't want to this time."

Sue shook her head. "I can do it."

Murmurs went around the room from the newer members as she suddenly thrust her hand out over the coals, not close enough to touch them, but definitely close enough to feel the heat. She licked her lips, then dipped her hand slightly lower. Everyone, including Alexandra, stared, fascinated, as Sue kept her trembling hand only inches above the glowing coals, and tears began to run down her face, while she stared at the far wall. Then suddenly she exclaimed, "Ah!" and pulled her hand back.

Everyone was silent as the blonde girl inhaled deeply, and shook her hand. Alexandra could see that her palm was now red and blistered.

"Pain is what fuels your visions," she gasped. "You'll probably only see glimpses. But you have to hold your hand over the heat long enough to see something. We'll know if you didn't."

All of the new members were staring at the red-hot coals, and then Alexandra spoke up. "First we have to sign in blood, now we have to burn ourselves. Is all this hazing just for kicks? I thought we're supposed to learn something here!"

Everyone looked at her. Darla and Angelique seemed to be trying to pretend they didn't know her, while Torvald and Stuart were grinning, albeit a little nervously.

John and Sue had more appraising expressions.

"You will, Quick," promised the dark-haired boy. "Starting tonight. But first you have to pass this test."

Alexandra folded her arms, remaining skeptical. The spirit they'd summoned last time had been mildly impressive, but she wasn't volunteering to stick her hand in a fire first.

The new members lined up, and one by one, thrust their hands over the lit charcoals in the brazier.

"The longer you endure the pain, the more the brazier will allow you to see," breathed Sue, as a ninth grader gritted his teeth and made a little whimpering sound, before his eyes widened and he gasped, then pulled his hand away.

"A Grim!" he exclaimed. "I saw a Grim!"

Alexandra glanced around. Some of the students seemed to think that was ominous, while others looked as confused as her.

One girl's hand was shaking as she put her hand almost a foot above the brazier, lowered it slowly, held it there for only a few seconds, then pulled it away.

"I saw something!" she insisted, as the two senior Mors Mortis Society members stared at her.

"What?" asked John.

"There will be a big snowstorm next month," she stammered. "Winter will come early."

"Try again," he snorted, pointing at the brazier. "Or give us your coin and leave."

Everyone watched, tensely, as the girl tried, balked several times, and then shook her head. She took her MMS coin out of a pocket in her robes and flung it into the brazier.

"I don't believe any of you actually saw anything!" she declared, and turned and slunk out of the room.

The older Society members shrugged. "We haven't even started doing things that will really scare you," John warned. "Anyone else who's bothered by a little pain might as well leave now."

Alexandra frowned. Most of the newer members looked increasingly nervous. Even Torvald and Stuart didn't look so cocky.

When it was Tomo's turn, the sixth grader thrust her hand directly over the coals without hesitation. Immediately her arm began to tremble, and Alexandra could see in the girl's eyes that it was taking all of her willpower not to show pain. She held her hand there for several seconds longer than most of the older kids had, and when she pulled it away, she was pale and sweating. John and Sue nodded approvingly, and didn't ask her what she'd seen.

Alexandra was both appalled and intensely curious. Was everyone really seeing a vision of the future? Torvald and Stuart went before her, and both boys hissed as they subjected themselves to the burning heat of the brazier. Stuart muttered something about crows when he was done, and to Alexandra's dismay, gave her a narrow look. Torvald looked considerably distressed after his own turn. He whispered something in Stuart's ear about his grandmother.

Another girl and a tenth grade boy balked when it was their turn before the brazier, though the boy was almost in tears before he finally gave up. By now, all the kids who'd already passed the test were looking smug, and they snickered as their less brave peers retreated from the attic room. When Alexandra's turn came, she knew there was no way she was backing out. She saw Maximilian, who was still awaiting his turn, glowering at her, and meeting his eyes, she held her hand over the brazier.

At first, it was just hot, and she quelled her immediate impulse to jerk her hand away. She'd played with fire before, even challenging Brian to hold his hand over a candle flame longer than her once. She had won, of course. Her mother said it was sheer dumb luck that she'd failed to burn their house down when she'd discovered a box of matches when she was six, and begun testing the flammability of various household items.

As she held her hand above the brazier, though, the smoke began stinging her nostrils, and the pain increased. With every heartbeat, she thought she'd reached the point at which she wouldn't be able to bear it any longer. But with her eyes locked on Maximilian, she refused to surrender, even though her eyes were now stinging too, with tears, and her hand was shaking.

And she no longer saw Maximilian. Instead, she saw that wall in the basement, painted with bears or cats, and people and birds. Even as the painted stone wall filled her vision, her skin continued blistering; the pain hadn't lessened at all. She wanted to remove her hand, but then the pictures began moving and she wanted to see this, too, though she didn't know what it meant.

The terrible thing with wings, looking more like some flying monster than a bird, opened its mouth and screamed as it descended from above and carried one of the hapless human figures away. The four-legged beasts chased the other humans, who ran for their lives.

Alexandra blinked away even more tears. Now she could see the room full of students in front of her again, and Maximilian still staring at her, and yet in her mind's eye she could also see the moving cave paintings, and almost hear the shrieking of the bird-monster and the screams of the terrified humans. She also thought she could smell burning flesh, and the pain made her want to scream herself. She knew the vision would end as soon as she withdrew her hand, and she wanted to so badly. Surely she had passed the test by now. But she gulped, even as Maximilian's expression changed from disapproval to what looked like genuine alarm. Then his face faded, and all she could see was the painted rock wall again. The painted figures were fading, the wall was becoming pitch black, as it had during the ceremony downstairs, and suddenly Alexandra felt as if

she were down there, standing in front of it, staring into a bottomless void.

Someone was screaming. It was a girl's terrified scream. It was loud at first, but it became fainter and fainter. Alexandra had the sense of someone falling, tumbling, receding somehow into that endless darkness, and she screamed too, and staggered away.

Someone caught her, and she realized she'd finally pulled away from the brazier. Her hand was in agony. She saw red, blistered, bubbling skin, and might have fallen to her knees if the boy behind her weren't holding her up. There were pale, shocked expressions all around the room.

Sue came forward and conjured bandages, which she began wrapping around Alexandra's hand.

"You can't go to the nurse," she cautioned, speaking loudly so everyone could hear. "Burn potions and simple healing charms won't work on these burns. Show them to Mrs. Murphy, and she'll know they were caused by Dark magic."

Alexandra was hissing as the pain in her hand burned and burned. Tears ran down her face. What had she just seen? Everyone was still staring at her.

She thought the older girl would ask her about her vision, but she didn't. She just smiled at her, and turned around. "Next."

Darla was pale and trembling as she held her hand over the coals. She flinched and whimpered, then squeezed her eyes shut, enduring the pain for several long seconds, before she opened her eyes wide and backed away. "My sister!" she cried out.

Angelique swallowed. Alexandra watched, remembering how the girl from New Orleans had been bragging about the counter-curses she'd learned at Baleswood. Angelique stared wide-eyed at the brazier, tried to put her hand over it several times, and pulled her hand back each time. In the dimly-lit room, her dark skin made her eyes seem unnaturally white and gleaming.

Finally, she turned to Darla. "I can't," she whimpered in a small voice. "I'm sorry."

Darla moaned in dismay. "Angelique!"

"If you're not going to do it, then give us back your coin, and leave," said Sue.

"Angelique, please," Darla pleaded, catching her friend's hand. Her eyes were still shining wetly.

Angelique took a coin out of her pocket and handed it to the older girl. Then, head down, she fled the room. Darla was left standing by herself, with tears running down her face. Alexandra felt sorry for her, and almost moved over to comfort her (though with one hand in a sling, and the other burned and wrapped in bandages, she wasn't sure how). But then Darla sniffed and rubbed at her eyes with the back of her hand, and raised her head to give Alexandra an almost accusing look, as if she had some reason to be angry at her. Alexandra just stared back at her, until Darla looked away.

None of the remaining new members held their hands over the coals as long as Alexandra had. Even Maximilian, with a stoic expression, waited only until his hand began to turn red. Alexandra saw his eyes cloud over, like the others, as the pain brought him some sort of vision, but his face revealed nothing else.

Everyone was now wincing, blowing on their blistered palms, or just waiting tensely. John, who seemed to be the co-leader of the Mors Mortis Society, spoke again. "Remember what Sue said. Students can't start showing up at the nurse's office with magical burns. You can use pain ointments and numbing charms for relief, but tonight I'll teach you something new: a Wound Relocating Charm."

Everyone paid rapt attention as John moved Sue's burn from her right hand to her left. It was a tricky bit of magic, and not everyone was able to imitate it immediately.

"Why is this Dark magic?" Alexandra asked, when she finally managed to move her own burn to her other hand. Her left hand now hurt just as much as her right had; she could see the charm's usefulness in moving the burn to a more convenient location, but it certainly wasn't going to make it heal faster or hurt less.

John gave her a creepy little smile. "Because," he explained slowly, "if you get really good at this charm, you can move your wounds to someone else."

There were several intakes of breath around the room at that. Alexandra saw Darla looking wide-eyed.

Torvald, after practicing several times, managed to move his burn to the back of his hand, and Alexandra saw that Maximilian had banished his somewhere out of sight. Darla was still struggling with the new spell when John announced: "We're going to teach you another charm now."

"This one is easy," Sue told them. "And it isn't a Dark Art, but it will still get you in trouble if the teachers catch you using it."

She reached into a bag, and pulled out a small framed portrait. A large, red-faced man dressed in a plaid shirt and blue jeans glared at them. There was an unremarkable room with a couch and set of windows behind him. He looked rather like a Muggle farmer, Alexandra thought, but he must have been a wizard because he moved in his portrait, looking around at the children gathered before him.

"You're all gonna come to a bad end, believe you me!" he shouted. "You listen to Sue and her no-good friends, and she'll get you all chained up or worse!"

"Shut up, Uncle," Sue responded, and pointed her wand at him. "Pictogel."

The red-faced man froze, mouth open.

Everyone stared at the portrait. It was now as static as a Muggle painting.

“Can he still see us?” Stuart asked, waving a hand in front of it.

“No,” Sue replied, smacking his hand. “And the school portraits are larger and harder to freeze than my dear uncle. This spell won't freeze them for more than a few seconds. But if you're careful – and it shouldn't be too hard to sneak up on a painting, even for the clumsiest among you –” There were snickers at this. “– they won't even be aware that they were frozen when it wears off.”

“Hooboy!” Torvald whooped. “We'll never be caught by those stupid hall monitors again!”

“Don't be a fool!” John snapped. “If you start using Freeze-Frame Spells indiscriminately, you will be caught! Before you cast it, you'd better make sure no one else is going to be walking down the hall when it wears off. The portraits will notice if people blink in and out of their view. And don't ever try it on Miss Marmsley.”

It was almost a minute before the plaid-shirted wizard began moving again. Indignantly, he continued berating them, in the moments between being frozen by kids practicing the Freeze-Frame Spell. By the time everyone had cast it successfully, it was past one a.m.

“Remember,” John warned them, as they began leaving, “try to use stairs and cross-corridors to avoid the portraits. The coins will help you, a little, but if you get caught Freeze-Framing a hall monitor, you'd better just take whatever punishment you get. Do not mention the Mors Mortis Society!”

But Alexandra was thinking about what John had said about the Wound Relocating Charm, as she made her way to the stairs, with other kids shuffling through the attic ahead of her and behind her. The thought of giving Larry Albo her burn was tempting – but besides the fact that it would obviously draw attention to her, it really did seem like a horrible thing to do to someone. Even Larry.

Although it would serve Max right to let him walk around with his arm in a sling, she thought.

She and Tomo found themselves together again on the stairs going down, and Alexandra gave the Japanese girl another dark look, wondering if Tomo was thinking about inflicting her burned hand on Anna. Tomo glanced at her only once, and Alexandra held up her own bandaged hand with an unmistakably threatening look. Tomo looked down again, and when they got to the second floor, she hurried away as quickly as she could to the sixth grade girls' dorm, while Alexandra snuck under the still-sleeping portrait hanging over Delta Delta Kappa Tau Hall, and back to her room.

Anna was asleep, and no sound came from the adjacent room. Alexandra felt both scorn and sympathy for Angelique, and only then, belatedly, did she wonder about Darla. The other girl had not accompanied Alexandra down the stairs, so she must have lingered behind.

It was hard to hide the burn the next morning, when Anna helped Alexandra put her uniform on. Mrs. Murphy had said the sling might come off in another day or two, but it was still hard to move her arm.

"What happened?" Anna asked, concerned. "How did you get burned? You should go to Mrs. Murphy."

"I will," Alexandra mumbled, thinking she might have to try to use the Wound Relocating Charm to put it on her leg or somewhere else where the nurse wouldn't see it, when she went to have her other injuries checked.

Anna was still looking at her expectantly, waiting for an explanation. Alexandra shrugged. "I got a little careless with a fire charm."

Anna frowned, and didn't say anything as she put on her own uniform. Alexandra knew Anna was too smart not to doubt her story, but she didn't say anything as they went to breakfast.

She cast the Wound Relocating Charm before going to see Mrs. Murphy, and tried to hide the limp it gave her when the burn on her

ankle rubbed painfully against her pants leg. Mrs. Murphy took off her sling, but told her she was still forbidden to do sports or heavy exercise, including flying, for another week. Alexandra nodded, secretly pleased that this was another week she'd get out of JROC drills.

She saw other members of the Mors Mortis Society around school that day, exchanging meaningful looks with her. Now and then she noticed Darla wincing from the burn she was hiding. Darla and Angelique didn't seem to be speaking to one another, which made Alexandra worry about her friendship with Anna. She wished she could tell Anna about the Mors Mortis Society.

If Anna was worried about her, Maximilian was as critical as ever, berating both of them for their uniforms and posture, and shouting at Alexandra that having a 'sore arm' was no excuse for being lazy or careless. She glared at him, wondering where he'd put his burn. He didn't seem to be in any pain, but she knew he must be hiding it, because her burn still hurt a lot.

After he finished yelling at them, and Anna had already fled, head down to hide tears, he caught Alexandra by her uninjured arm, and whispered in her ear, "Now do you see that this Dark Arts stuff isn't something you should be playing with?"

"Why are you, then?" she retorted.

His jaw clenched. "Don't worry about me!" he hissed. "I don't want to see you at any more meetings!"

"Like I care what you want?" she hissed back. "Let go of me!"

His eyes were stormy, but he let go, and she jerked away from him, and stalked down the hall after Anna. She couldn't figure out why Maximilian King seemed to have taken a personal interest in her, but if he wanted her to quit the Mors Mortis Society, trying to bully her into doing so was exactly the wrong way to go about it.

She was surprised when the MMS coin tingled again the next night. By now Alexandra could recognize the most common astrological

symbols, and deduced that the next meeting was Saturday, only four nights after the last one.

That Saturday night, they met outside the stables. It was chilly, and the Society posted lookouts, in case Ms. Gale or another member of the staff happened to check outside the building. Alexandra wondered what they were going to do that required being outside.

John announced: "Tonight, we're going to learn how to make a Snakestone."

Grinning at the sense of anticipation, he led them across the grass to the Quodpot field. Behind the stands there were several storage sheds where game equipment and other things were kept. Students weren't supposed to be able to open them, but John seemed to have no difficulty casting an Unlocking Charm on the padlock of one, and its small doors swung open with a wave of his wand.

Darla was the first to scream, as a great writhing, tangled ball of serpents came tumbling out. Everyone, including Alexandra, took several steps back. Her heart raced as she stared at the twisting, slithering, hissing mass of snakes, dozens of them. Then loud buzzing sounds drowned out the gasps and shrieks from some of the kids, and Alexandra's heart pounded even harder in her chest.

Rattlesnakes!

She'd been lucky, roaming the woods and fields around Larkin Mills; she'd never encountered a rattlesnake up close. Nonetheless, the instinctive urge to flee was strong. One boy looked as if he were about to pass out, and a sophomore, after unsuccessfully trying not to panic, finally broke and ran.

John ignored the flight of their newest former member, and said, "I put a Snakestone in the shed this morning. That's how many snakes it attracted. You leave one out in the forest, and in a few days you'll have a giant pit of snakes."

Alexandra stared at the reptiles, and tried to imagine how creating a giant pit of snakes would be useful.

"Snakestones actually aren't hard to make," John continued, blithely ignoring the continued rattling and hissing from the angry snakes. A few of them were beginning to slither in his direction, though most seemed to be staying where they were, by the shed. "And if you alter the charm a little, it can summon spiders or scorpions instead."

Shudders went through the group. Alexandra didn't shudder, but she was thinking that there weren't many good uses she could think of for a giant swarm of spiders or scorpions either.

"To make one, you need two things," he went on. "A stone, and a snake. So everyone grab a snake."

The older Mors Mortis Society members moved cautiously towards the snake-infested shed, while the new members stared at him as if he were crazy.

"Are you wizards or not?" John demanded. "If you can't handle some snakes..." He shrugged. "You all know the rest by now."

Alexandra saw that some of the veteran members seemed to know charms that brought a snake docilely to them, while others simply blasted one with a Stunning Spell. That seemed rather cruel to her. She frowned, and watched as Darla managed to separate a garter snake from the rest with her wand, and then looked unsure what to do with it. Tomo already had a black racer in hand. Determinedly, Alexandra approached a large copperhead that everyone else was avoiding.

"Petrificus Totalus!" she said, pointing her wand at the viper. It stiffened, and became unnaturally straight and rigid. Cautiously, keeping her eye on the other snakes, she reached for its tail and dragged it closer to her, before picking it up and holding it like a baton. She glanced at Maximilian, and saw that he was holding a rattlesnake by the neck. It was squirming angrily in his hand, but like several other students, he'd used his wand to cast a Silencing Charm on the buzzer at the end of its tail.

John waited until everyone had grabbed a snake, and then he walked into the now-empty shed, and retrieved a perfectly ordinary-looking round stone, which he held in the palm of his hand.

“All right. We're not all going to make Snakestones tonight. Having a couple dozen around the school, some of you are bound to let them out of your control. But I'll show you how to make one.”

He tossed the Snakestone to Sue, then looked around, and set his eyes on the snake still crawling on the ground in front of Darla. She still hadn't quite figured out how to grab it. John walked over to her, and snatched it up.

“This one's not even poisonous!” he scoffed at her, before turning to the rest of the group.

“It's best to choose a smooth, round stone,” he advised. “They're easier to get down the snake's throat.” He pulled another stone fitting that description out of his pocket. He had everyone gather around to watch as he performed a series of incantations to charm the stone. Some kids were scribbling notes. Alexandra didn't recognize the words, or even the language – it wasn't Latin or Greek, like most spells they learned at Charmbridge.

Then Alexandra watched, aghast, as the older boy proceeded to force Darla's snake's jaws open, push the stone into its mouth, and stuff it down its throat. Alexandra could see the lump slowly traveling down the poor creature's body.

With a smirk, John handed the garter snake back to Darla, who stared at him.

“What am I supposed to do with it?” she squealed.

“In a day or so, the snake will die,” John said. “Then you cut the stone out of its body, and the enchantment will be complete.”

Darla looked as if she were going to be ill. Alexandra was more and more appalled. “Can't you get the stone out without killing the snake?” she asked.

John looked at her and snorted. "That's part of the enchantment, Quick. Didn't figure you'd be so soft-hearted over a snake. But the rest of you can let your snakes go, if it makes you feel any better."

Alexandra carried her petrified snake to the edge of the woods, and set it down carefully in the grass. She saw most of the other kids simply flinging their snakes into the woods, if they even brought them that far. Shaking her head, she returned to the crowd gathered around the equipment shed. Darla now had both hands around the snake's neck, though her arms were trembling.

"Where I am supposed to keep it?" she whined. "I have a cat, and my roommate has a jarvey."

"Then put it in a box. One that your cat can't get into," John suggested. "Oh, and once you've got the stone, make sure to keep a raptor feather tied to it, or it will attract snakes to your room."

Darla stared with horror at the snake, which was still undulating slowly as it dangled from her hands with that large lump in its belly, and then at John. Her eyes were wide and pleading.

"Did you really want to do this, or are you a little girl who wants to play with the big kids?" John mocked her.

Darla flinched. Alexandra again felt unaccustomed sympathy for her. The eyes of the entire Mors Mortis Society were on her now, and Darla's face twitched, before she took a deep breath and gathered her courage. She swallowed hard. "I can do it."

John smiled. "Bring the Snakestone to the next meeting." He looked around. "We'll practice some more snake magic next week. The big event, though, is Halloween. Those of you who make it through our Halloween ceremony will be ready to start learning true Dark Arts."

Alexandra walked back inside with Darla. The other girl had the snake in both hands, and looked a little green.

“Just let it go,” Alexandra urged. “It’ll probably throw up the stone, or something. You don’t have to stay in the Mors Mortis Society.”

Darla looked at her angrily.

“Are you quitting?” she demanded.

Alexandra frowned. “Dunno,” she muttered. “They do know some cool magic, but...”

“Oh, but I couldn’t possibly be as great a witch as you!” she sneered. “I suppose you think I can’t do this!”

“Do you really want to keep a snake under your bed, and then cut it open? What are you going to tell Angelique?”

“I’m not going to tell Angelique anything, just like you’re not telling Anna anything.” They were back in Charmbridge’s hallways now, sneaking back to their dorm, as the other kids did the same thing. Darla fixed Alexandra with a cold look. “Maybe you’re just jealous, because I’m the one who will have a Snakestone. You’re jealous because John picked me.”

“I don’t think so,” Alexandra replied flatly.

Darla sniffed, and walked to her room, opening the door and slipping inside without another look in Alexandra’s direction. Alexandra shook her head, and then opened the door to her room, once more crawling into bed as quietly as possible, so as not to wake up Anna.

“Darla asked me if she could have one of Jingwei’s feathers,” Anna remarked to Alexandra on Monday, after they’d been released from JROC drill. It had been another grueling day, with Maximilian riding Alexandra harder than ever, now that Mrs. Murphy had pronounced her healed enough to resume normal physical activities.

“Did you give her one?” Alexandra asked.

“She wouldn’t tell me why she wanted it.” Anna paused, and glanced sidelong at Alexandra. “She said it was just a charm she’s working on,

but she got all huffy when I asked questions about it, and told me, 'Never mind'."

Alexandra shrugged, and tried to look disinterested. She hoped Darla had enough sense to go to the aviary and find a feather. She didn't think Anna would react well to being told to check for snakes before going into the bathroom.

She lay awake that night for a while, but when she didn't hear Honey or Angelique screaming, she assumed Darla had procured a feather.

Anna knew something was going on. She didn't ask Alexandra questions, but she wore a worried expression the rest of that week. Another Mors Mortis Society meeting was scheduled for Friday night; Alexandra wondered if they'd continue to have weekly meetings. She didn't think she could keep sneaking in and out of her room at midnight without Anna confronting her. For that matter, it seemed risky to have so many students sneaking around after curfew; someone was bound to be caught eventually.

Friday night, Darla brought her Snakestone, looking quite pleased with herself. The Mors Mortis Society met outside again, and John Manuelito and Sue Fox taught them a charm to conjure snakes out of the air. Darla looked less smug when she wasn't able to learn it by the end of the evening. Alexandra found it a bit trickier than anything they'd learned in Charms class so far, and definitely more dangerous, but she knew it wasn't really Dark magic because in JROC, she'd heard Maximilian and Martin talking about using it in the Dueling Club. Maximilian was able to shoot snakes from the end of his wand with ease. Alexandra noticed Tomo conjuring several lethal-looking vipers. As the snakes multiplied, they slithered over to where Darla's Snakestone sat in the grass, and writhed around in a slithery mass.

Alexandra thought the Serpensortia spell was fun (she chose to conjure harmless grass snakes), until the end of the evening, when John pointed his wand at the growing pile of serpents and said, "Incendio!" A fireball shot out of his wand and engulfed the snakes. For an awful second, Alexandra could hear their hisses, which in her imagination sounded almost like screams, and the smell of burning flesh filled everyone's nostrils, and then the snakes were all burned to

ashes. She gasped, simultaneously impressed by the power of the spell, and horrified by what John had done.

"You didn't have to kill them!" she protested.

John wasn't the only one who stared at her in disbelief. Alexandra caught Maximilian frowning at her, before John asked, "What should I have done, left a bunch of exotic poisonous snakes to crawl off and hide on school grounds? You complain an awful lot, Quick."

Maximilian's loud snort silenced her, but she stewed on her way back to her room. She wondered if she was being stupid. They were just snakes, after all. It wasn't as if she wanted to keep one as a pet. But the casual way they had summoned the animals, and then simply destroyed them all when they were no longer useful, bothered her.

She was bothered by other things, too. Not all the kids who'd come to the first couple of meetings were still coming. Alexandra was having second thoughts herself; now that she was starting to recognize other Mors Mors Society members around school, she was beginning to realize that many of them were antisocial, creepy, or just plain mean. The club seemed to attract disaffected loners, misfits, and a few kids whom Alexandra suspected were genuinely disturbed. She was surprised Larry Albo hadn't been invited; she certainly couldn't imagine that he'd have turned down a chance to learn how to be an even nastier bully.

There were still a few members like Torvald and Stuart, who probably just wanted to learn more potent curses for their forbidden games of hexem, and others who were merely fascinated by learning things they weren't supposed to. (Alexandra had to admit this probably described her, too.) She wasn't sure why Darla persisted, though. This was not Darla's crowd at all, and she'd never struck Alexandra as being intellectually curious.

Besides a reluctance to be a quitter like Angelique, Alexandra had two other reasons for staying in the Mors Mortis Society. One was petty: Maximilian's bullying had made her determined not to let him win. The other was concern for Anna. Tomo Matsuzaka didn't seem bothered by anything they were doing, and if Anna's nemesis was

staying, then Alexandra wanted to make sure she learned anything Tomo did.

Although Society members exchanged spells they had learned, and traded forbidden texts and bits of lore, most of it did not seem very dangerous to Alexandra. There were a lot of curses good for frightening and harassing people, but nothing as deadly as John's incineration spell. Alexandra's eyes smoldered when one evening she caught Tomo teaching an appreciative older student her Nail-Pulling Jinx, and muttered something about turning her hair into snakes next time. She felt a moment of vicious satisfaction when Tomo blanched, but she knew it was an empty threat.

The Mors Mortis Society continued to meet regularly throughout October. John and Sue kept talking about the Halloween party, and the older Society members grinned and smirked, which Alexandra guessed meant that new members were going to have to do something unpleasant again.

At their last meeting before Halloween, John and Sue said that only veteran members in good standing got to learn "real Dark Arts." Becoming a veteran member in good standing apparently involved going through more initiation ceremonies. Alexandra wondered, not for the first time, if this was just a hazing ritual the older members made all the younger ones go through for the sadistic joy of it.

A lot like the JROC, she thought, looking at Maximilian with a frown. He was examining an illegal mistletoe wand that a ninth grade girl had brought to show off to him, and when he caught her staring at him, he gave her the same angry, disapproving scowl he always did, before she looked away.

Halloween

Halloween was a major holiday in the wizarding world. Charmbridge Academy's Halloween Festival rivaled the following month's Thanksgiving Feast. There were small parties and contests throughout the week. Constance and Forbearance beamed with delight when they took first and third places in the middle school division in a Transfiguration contest. Forbearance's essay about Old and New World wandcrafting also won a prize. Alexandra thought Anna's congratulations sounded a little strained; Anna's essay had taken second place.

It was the dueling competition that Alexandra was looking forward to, though. She couldn't wait until next year, when she'd be able to join Charmbridge's Dueling Club. When she went to sign up for the competition, she was unsurprised to see Torvald and Stuart's names on the list. Practically every member of the JROC had also signed up, of course. Alexandra's eyes fixed on Maximilian King's name, and then, a few lines below, Larry Albo's. She snorted. She'd sure like to see those two hexing each other, though she wasn't sure who she'd rather see lose.

She frowned when she saw that Tomo had also signed up; most sixth graders hadn't learned enough magic to duel at all. And she was nonplussed to see Darla's name. She wasn't sure she'd ever even seen Darla cast a spell outside a classroom. She recognized a couple of other Mors Mortis Society members as well, but John Manuelito and Sue Fox's names were conspicuously absent.

The Mors Mortis Society was holding its much-anticipated (and dreaded) Halloween ceremony at midnight, which meant they would all have to sneak out after the feast. There was nothing cryptic about the coin's message this time: it simply said, 'In the Woods.'

Yet Alexandra was more anxious about the dueling competition that afternoon than she was about whatever the Mors Mortis Society meant to put her through. She didn't fear getting hurt nearly as much as she feared losing.

Ms. Shirtliffe was the referee, but Alexandra was surprised to see that Dean Grimm was not only attending, but judging, along with the other Assistant Deans. Alexandra's friends were all there to support her, though none of them were competing. Anna didn't like dueling; David, she suspected, didn't want to get beaten by her; and Constance and Forbearance thought dueling was "unrespectable for girls." Alexandra thought this was a shame, though perhaps fortunate for her, as she was pretty sure that the Ozarkers would be good at it. She decided not to ask whether they thought she was "unrespectable."

The sixth, seventh, and eighth graders were competing first, and Alexandra watched with interest, waiting her turn, as Ms. Shirtliffe called the first two duelists forward: "Tomo Matsuzaka and Jacob Vatter!"

Jacob was the only other sixth grader to enter the competition. He was an Old Colonial, one of the Palatines from somewhere back East, dressed in a dark suit that was too big for him. It made him look small and vulnerable, even though he was taller than Tomo. The Majokai witch wore a plain yellow robe and slippers, and a fiercely determined expression. The two youngest duelists held their wands up and bowed formally, then pointed them simultaneously at each other, shouting, "Stupefy!"

Everyone knew how to cast a Stunning Spell, but most eleven-year-olds couldn't throw one with any force. Jacob's spell struck Tomo's in mid-air and the two spells both vanished in a flash of light. Tomo repeated the incantation immediately, while her opponent stood there uncertainly, and her second spell knocked him off his feet. He lay there looking dazed, and Tomo bowed as Ms. Shirtliffe declared her the winner of the first match.

Almost all of the other middle schoolers repeated exactly the same spell with identical tactics, pointing their wands and trying to stun their opponents as quickly as possible. They were clumsy and slow, and most of their spells were extremely weak. Sonja Rackham and Ebenezer Smith pelted each other with red bursts of light, without much effect, until Ms. Shirtliffe called a halt, and Ms. Grimm and the other judges declared Ebenezer the winner on technique and form.

When Ms. Shirliffe called, "Alexandra Quick and Darla Dearborn!" Alexandra sighed, then smiled at her friends, and stepped up onto the duelists' platform.

Darla, who usually wouldn't be caught dead wearing anything that wasn't pretty and feminine, had on a plain blouse under a heavy jacket, long pants, and thick, ugly boots. Her hair was tied up in an unflattering bun. None of her usual jewelry or makeup was evident. She looked more serious than Alexandra had ever seen her. On the other side of the platform, Angelique was there, encouraging her roommate, and looking worried.

Ms. Shirliffe stood between them, and as she glanced at Alexandra, who was in her uniform like all the other JROC students, Alexandra was sure the teacher winked. Then she stepped back and made a gesture with her wand. "Begin!"

Darla and Alexandra held up their wands and bowed to each other, and then Alexandra immediately leaped aside and landed in a crouch.

"Stupefy!" she shouted, pointing her wand at Darla.

"Avada Kedavra!" shouted Darla.

Alexandra barely registered the chorus of gasps rising from the crowd. She didn't see a spell come out of her opponent's wand, and Darla was knocked flat on her back by the red beam that came out of Alexandra's. As Alexandra stood up, she looked around in confusion at the shocked expressions on everyone's faces.

Ms. Shirliffe jumped between the two girls and barked, "Accio wand!" Darla's wand flew into her hand, while Ms. Grimm stepped up onto the platform and grabbed Alexandra's shoulder.

"Are you all right?" the Dean demanded, staring at her.

"I'm fine," Alexandra stammered, becoming more unnerved by the second. "What's wrong?"

Ms. Grimm continued staring at her for a moment, with an unreadable expression, and then let go of her. She turned to Ms. Shirtliffe, who was now standing over Darla.

"You actually knocked her out," the JROC commander said, in a very flat tone.

"Take her to the infirmary," Grimm ordered. "Then, assuming she has no lasting injuries, bring her to my office." Her voice was very mild. Alexandra knew from experience that that deceptively quiet voice and dry tone meant someone was in big trouble.

Ms. Shirtliffe pointed her wand at the unconscious girl, and said, "Rennervate." Darla gasped, and lifted her head.

"It was just a Stunning Spell!" Alexandra protested. "That's allowed! I wasn't trying to hurt her!"

Ms. Grimm looked down at her. "I know, Alexandra," she soothed. "Don't worry. You did nothing wrong." And as Alexandra wondered why those very unlikely words sounded so uncomfortable, Grimm looked around and announced, "I'm sorry, but the dueling competition is canceled." And as some of the kids started to groan, she added, "That is all," in a very severe tone that immediately silenced everyone.

Alexandra stepped off the platform, confused and upset. That was when she saw that Anna's face was white as a sheet. Her eyes were wide and horrified, and the Pritchards were holding hands, with each pressing the other hand over her heart. They also wore shocked, horrified expressions. Only David looked as confused as her.

"Someone please tell me what's going on," she pleaded.

Anna gulped, and then threw her arms around Alexandra.

Alexandra turned red, with embarrassment and growing irritation. "If someone doesn't tell me —"

"That was a Killin' Curse, Alexandra," said Constance quietly.

Alexandra blinked, and stared at Constance. "A Killing Curse?" she repeated, while Anna reluctantly let go of her, and David gaped.

"It's an Unforgivable," nodded Forbearance.

"Darkest of Dark magic," whispered Constance.

Dazed, Alexandra looked around. Some kids were starting to disperse, muttering and whispering amongst themselves. Most of them were staring at her. Even Larry Albo looked shocked. Then all the JROC students marched over. They all looked concerned, even Maximilian. Alexandra had no idea how to take this, and just nodded distractedly as Beatrice asked her if she was all right, just as the Dean had.

"Obviously her curse didn't work if I'm still alive," Alexandra said impatiently. She tried to look unbothered, but as realization sank in, she became increasingly perturbed. Not so much by the possibility that she could have been killed, but by the fact that Darla had apparently been trying to kill her.

The Halloween Feast that night was a bit more somber than the previous year's. Dean Grimm, Dean Black, and Darla were notably absent, and so was Angelique. Alexandra wondered if Angelique had known what Darla was going to do. She didn't think so; she hadn't noticed at the time, but Anna said Darla's roommate had looked as shocked as everyone else. Darla and Angelique were best friends, though, so Alexandra supposed Angelique must be pretty upset, and might be afraid of facing her.

Alexandra couldn't figure out why Darla would want to kill her. Their friendship had always been rocky at best; she thought Darla was pretentious, snotty, and vain, and Darla had always been rather patronizing towards her. But although they were not always on speaking terms, Alexandra had never wished the other girl harm. It bothered her more than she wanted to admit that Darla's animosity had turned deadly.

As they sat at a table in the jack-o-lantern- and bat-bedecked cafeteria, enjoying roast pig, squash, mashed potatoes, and pumpkin

juice, Constance mumbled, "I don't know where she could'a learnt such Dark magic."

Alexandra thought Anna was looking at her a little strangely, and shrugged casually. "She could have gotten it out of a book, couldn't she?"

"Anyone could get the incantation out of a book," said Anna. "But you know it takes more than just knowing the words to cast a spell."

Alexandra rolled her eyes. "Of course I know that, Anna! But from what you guys say, nothing happened when she tried to cast it, so apparently she didn't know anything more than the words."

"It's a right evil curse," Forbearance murmured quietly.

"Powerful evil," Constance agreed.

"Takes a powerful evil sorceress to kill proper with it," Forbearance whispered.

"Well, there you go," Alexandra countered. "I don't think Darla is powerful or evil. Just stupid."

"Even if she just got it out of a book," David asked, "what was she thinking throwing something called a Killing Curse?"

"Maybe she wanted to scare me. Maybe she thought that would throw me off," Alexandra scoffed.

"Maybe she's been hanging out with people she shouldn't," Anna suggested quietly, still looking at Alexandra.

Alexandra bit back a snappy retort, and just shrugged again. "Maybe."

It wasn't hard to sneak away that night. Students were having parties in the recreation rooms, or playing games of Plunkball in the hallways, throwing Fanged Frisbees, or engaging in prank wars. Outside, some kids were lighting up the athletic fields and lawns surrounding

Charmbridge Academy with impromptu games of night Quodpot, or trailing fiery sparks across the sky as they circled the school on their brooms. Alexandra saw Ms. Gale putting a stop to a game of gnome-hockey, so while the custodian was distracted, she hurried across the lawn to the edge of the woods, looking around to make sure no one had noticed her. Students weren't supposed to go into the woods alone after dark. She saw Stuart and Torvald sneaking into the tree line, coming from the same direction, but knew better than to wave or call out to them.

With no more explicit directions than 'In the Woods,' Alexandra supposed finding the Mors Mortis Society gathering was going to be part of whatever hazing they had in mind for tonight. She was wary and alert as she crept through the trees, further and further from the lights of Charmbridge Academy. She remembered a similar excursion into the woods last year, which had almost ended badly. Some students told stories of the Hodag, a fearsome, indestructible monster that supposedly prowled the forest. While the adults all said the Hodag was a myth, Alexandra and Anna had nearly encountered something out here.

She was more worried about the other kids, though – she expected them to jump out from behind a tree, or hex her from hiding, or perhaps drop something on her. She was sure the Mors Mortis Society would be trying to frighten all the new members on Halloween Night... so she was quite surprised when she stumbled into a clearing and found John and Sue and the rest of them just standing around a fire. They nodded to her, and then Stuart and Torvald came crashing through the underbrush and joined her.

“Almost everyone's here,” Sue announced, in a low voice that Alexandra thought was a bit theatrical. The older girl seemed to be deliberately standing so that the fire illuminated her from below and cast sinister shadows across her face. Alexandra covered her mouth to stifle a laugh, as she wondered whether these warlock-wannabes were going to stand around the fire and tell ghost stories.

No one else was laughing, though, and they waited in silence until one more small figure crept into the clearing. Tomo Matsuzaka pulled a brown and red cloak around her shoulders and made a bit of a

detour around Alexandra, then stood nervously at the edge of the gathering.

"We're missing Darla," John observed, and gave Alexandra an ominous look, as if Darla's absence were her fault. Alexandra looked back at him expressionlessly. "But I think after what she's done, we'll let her skip the final initiation," he continued.

"Trying to kill me, you mean?" Alexandra muttered. She doubted Darla would be back – if trying to kill another student wasn't an expellable offense, what was? Stuart and Torvald both glanced at her, not looking as amused as they usually did.

"Tonight," John proclaimed, "you will all have to face fear itself!"

How dramatic, Alexandra thought sarcastically.

"Everyone give me your coins," Sue demanded, walking around the circle and holding out her hand. Each of the new members handed over their MMS coins, and Sue put them all into a little purse, and then walked off into the woods. Alexandra watched her go, wondering what she was up to.

The group was quiet. Everyone looked at John expectantly, but he said nothing. The other older members just looked smug. The newer members shifted restlessly. Alexandra went over to the fire and warmed her hands, ignoring Maximilian, and trying to look unbothered by any of this. Really, what were they going to do? Try to scare her? Make her go into the woods alone? She'd already done that.

Sue returned five minutes later, looking pale, and nodded to John. John told the group, "Let's go," and with a gesture, led everyone back the way Sue had gone.

They walked through the dark woods, leaving the fire behind. They could hear rustling and hooting and other sounds of forest night life, but Alexandra suspected that the sound of over twenty kids traipsing through the woods would drive away most forest creatures. Their hike only took them another hundred yards or so, before they reached a

very large tree, mostly dead but still intact, towering high above them. There was a gaping hole in its trunk, large enough for two adults to walk inside with arms outstretched. It must have been hollowed out by lightning and fire, and in the darkness, it looked like an enormous gaping maw rising out of the ground, ready to swallow anyone who walked inside.

It was spooky, Alexandra had to admit.

"All you have to do is go inside and retrieve a coin," John informed them. "One at a time. Anyone want to volunteer to go first?"

The new members all looked at each other, and then Stuart stepped forward, with a smirk. He had his wand out.

"I know what this is," he boasted. "There's a Boggart in there, isn't there?"

John Manuelito regarded the younger boy for a moment, blinking slowly, and then replied, "Yes."

Stuart looked triumphantly over his shoulder at Torvald, and the two eighth graders exchanged grins. Alexandra frowned. They obviously knew something about Boggarts she didn't. All she could recall was something about them also being known as 'bogey-monsters,' and liking to hide in closets or under beds.

John smiled slowly. "Have you ever encountered a wild Boggart?" he asked.

Stuart looked back at him. "A wild Boggart?" His grin faltered.

"Some of you may have encountered Boggarts before," said John. Alexandra saw a couple of kids shudder. "But any Boggart you found around home or school was tame. Domesticated Boggarts are weak and lazy, used to preying on small children and old people." His long nose wrinkled slightly, as he sneered. "Oh sure, they're scary enough when they jump out at you from a closet, but a nasty fright is all they give most people." He looked over his shoulder at the dark hollow in the tree, and back at the waiting kids. "Comparing the monster under

your bed to a wild Boggart is like comparing a house cat to a Wampus.” He gave Stuart a knowing smile. “So go ahead and try your Riddikulus Charm.”

Stuart swallowed, and proceeded forward towards the dark cavity in the tree. He extended his wand, and pronounced, “Lumos.” The light cast moving shadows inside the enormous hollowed out trunk, before Stuart stepped inside, and then the darkness seemed to swallow him and his glowing wand.

Alexandra waited, and tried desperately to recall whether Mr. Newton or Ms. Shirtliffe had ever mentioned 'Ridiculous Charms.' She didn't think so.

Then she heard Stuart scream: “Riddikulus!” He screamed it twice more, sounding more desperate each time. “Riddikulus! RIDDIKULUS!”

All the older members of the Mors Mortis Society laughed, while nervous titters went through those awaiting their turns.

Stuart came barreling out of the darkness, stumbling and almost scrambling on his hands and knees. His wand was no longer glowing, and he panted heavily as he skidded to a halt and nearly collapsed at John's feet. Then he looked up, his face clammy and pale, and held up his other hand. It was clutching a gold coin.

“Well done,” said John. “You're now a full member of the Mors Mortis Society.” He clapped Stuart on the shoulder, and Stuart managed a shaky grin as the others applauded.

Torvald and Maximilian both stepped forward to go next, and Maximilian pushed Torvald aside. Torvald looked annoyed, but he didn't protest too much as the bigger boy advanced into the tree without another word, and without bothering to light his wand.

Everyone listened nervously, but there were no shouts of “Riddikulus!” or any other sounds from within. Alexandra was now trying to formulate a strategy, and wished she could ask Stuart what he'd seen. What did a Boggart do? Scare you, obviously, but how

scary could it be if you were expecting it to jump out at you? It must look really scary, but even so, if all it was was a bogey-monster, how could it be that frightening?

She looked at Stuart again. He was still trembling a little. He was also whispering to Torvald, so she tried to edge closer, hoping to overhear what he was saying, and then Maximilian emerged from the darkness. He looked almost the same as when he went in, until Alexandra noticed that the hand he held out to show John his coin was trembling, and his eyes were wide in the moonlight. He almost seemed to stumble a moment, before he turned and walked back to where he'd been standing before.

Alexandra frowned. Whatever else she thought about Maximilian, she didn't think he was a coward. Something in there had frightened him, even when he was expecting it. A cold, crawling sensation began to inch its way up her spine, and she angrily suppressed the feeling – maybe it was getting scared in anticipation of what you'd see that did you in.

Torvald took a deep breath and went forward. The darkness swallowed him, and he too tried to cast a Riddikulus Charm, before he went silent. The silence afterwards was even more ominous. Everyone looked at each other. Alexandra felt goosebumps crawling over her skin again.

The Boggart just frightened you – it couldn't actually hurt you, could it?

She was actually beginning to get worried about Torvald, when he fell out of the tree trunk and landed on the ground. She realized after a moment that he was sobbing.

“Where's your coin?” John asked unsympathetically.

Torvald held up a hand, with his head still bowed. A coin lay in his palm. Alexandra breathed a sigh of relief. John nodded and smiled, while Stuart helped Torvald stand.

Four more kids went inside to face the Boggart. Another girl tried to cast a Riddikulus charm. Whether it worked or not, she came staggering out, wide-eyed and almost hysterical, but she had found a coin. Another boy apparently decided to fight the Boggart, and they all saw flashes of light from Stunning and Blasting charms. He was screaming the entire time. Finally he ran out in a panic, without a coin.

“Go back in there and get your coin,” John ordered.

“No way.” The boy shook his head.

“Then you don't pass initiation.”

In reply, the boy spat something obscene, and stomped off through the woods. John sneered at him, and looked at the remaining initiates. Two more went before Alexandra. One of them screamed for several minutes, and then didn't emerge. John and Sue looked at each other, sighed, and went in together. They dragged the unfortunate girl back out. She was trembling like a leaf, and her teeth were chattering. Sue and John were taking deep breaths.

“We'll help her get back to her room afterwards,” Sue muttered disdainfully. The tenth grade girl was shivering at her feet, with her knees pulled up to her chest.

Then it was Alexandra's turn.

If all these losers could do this, she thought, looking at the other members of the Mors Mortis Society, then so can I. And she stepped forward.

“D-don't g-go in th-there,” the girl on the ground stuttered, catching Alexandra's sleeve.

“I'll be okay,” Alexandra answered, gently prying the older girl's fingers away. She didn't dare look at anyone else, and she stepped into the dark waiting maw of the tree.

“Lumos,” she said, holding out her wand, and in the light radiating from its tip, she saw flashes reflecting off two coins lying on the

ground at the far side of the tree's cavernous interior. Another metallic gleam shined off of a coin that Sue must have wedged into a crevasse at about eye level.

Too easy, Alexandra thought, as she stepped closer to the coins while looking all around and above.

She was expecting to see a horrible, bug-eyed monster, or a scaly demon, or maybe a Hodag, with the body of a crocodile, the head of a frog, and tusks and claws and spikes.

Instead, a girl stepped out of the shadows between her and where the coins lay. Alexandra took a step back, and gasped. "Bonnie?"

It was Bonnie Seabury, but the younger girl's face was mottled green. Her swollen purple tongue was hanging out of her mouth, and her eyes bulged grotesquely in a dead, corpse-like face. There were bits of algae and weeds clinging to her hair.

"You got me killed," she accused.

"No, I didn't!" Alexandra protested. "I saved you!" She pointed her wand. "Ridiculous!"

Nothing happened. Bonnie looked at her with a sad, frightened expression, made all the more horrible by the way her eyes rolled slowly as her head listed lifelessly to one side.

"I went back," she croaked. "Back to the pond. I looked up to you! I wanted to be like you. I wanted to see the naiad."

"It wasn't a naiad, it was a Kappa..." Alexandra shook her head, as if trying to clear it. Bonnie wasn't dead. She couldn't be.

"We're all dead because of you!" Brian screamed. The Boggart looked like Bonnie's brother now. He was angry, accusing, tears running down his cheeks, but his eyes were empty and black, his tears were blood red, and his face was a ghastly pallid white. "You freak! None of us wanted you around! We knew you'd hurt us with

your Dark magic! You had a stupid temper tantrum, and unleashed a curse on all of us!"

Alexandra swallowed. "I did not!" She pointed her wand at him again, but her hand was trembling. Then she put her other hand over her mouth, to stifle a scream.

"You burned our house down," said Claudia Green. Alexandra could barely recognize her mother, with her flesh blackened and charred, as if she'd been burned alive. She took another step back.

"N-No," she stammered. "I d-didn't! I mean, I did b-b-but I d-di'n't hurt Momma..." Her eyes were burning and she blinked back tears. She wasn't even aware that she'd spoken as if she had suddenly regressed in age.

Her mother was looking at her with a disappointed expression... as disappointed as a burnt corpse could look.

"Why couldn't you just stay at Charmbridge?" she asked. "You know I never wanted you to come back. Can't you tell how relieved I am when you go away? Do you really think I don't know what you are?" Her burnt, cracked lips peeled back in a grimace of disgust.

"You're not real!" Alexandra tried to shout, but her voice choked up. She was trembling, and didn't realize at first that the Boggart had changed shape yet again.

"It will be for the best, won't it, Alexandra?" It was Ms. Grimm, smiling cruelly. "When my sister Obliviates your mother, and your stepfather, and Brian and Bonnie and everyone else who ever knew you. You'll be erased. It will be as if you never existed, and they'll all be so much happier!"

Alexandra screamed: "Avada —!" Grimm, or the Boggart, looked frightened and disappeared. The words caught in Alexandra's throat. She felt sick. What was she doing? They were right —

She gulped for air, and dived for a glittering coin on the ground. As she grabbed it and stood up, Ms. Grimm reappeared.

"You're Dark!" Grimm screamed. "I know it, you know it, it's only a matter of time before everyone knows it!"

Alexandra ran out of the tree, and almost ran into John. He smirked down at her.

"Was that Ms. Grimm?" he asked. "Sounded like her. I'm disappointed. I thought your Boggart would be different, Quick."

Breathing rapidly in and out, her cheeks burned with shame as she wiped at her eyes. She held up her coin silently, then didn't wait for him to respond before she turned away from him and walked back to where she'd been standing, next to Stuart and Torvald. She was grateful when they barely glanced at her, and then looked away.

She trembled, hardly paying attention as the others went in to face the Boggart. It was all a trick. The Boggart just made her see things. It wasn't real. Bonnie hadn't been drowned by a Kappa. Alexandra had never unleashed a curse on Brian, and she and her mother had both escaped the fire that had burned down their house.

Another student balked, and left in disgrace. An older boy came out of the tree shrieking like a girl, and then threw up. Last to go was Tomo, and Alexandra watched as the youngest Mors Mortis Society initiate squared her shoulders and marched inside.

There was silence. Stuart and Torvald were leaning forward, trying to see into the hollowed out tree, without coming too close. Barely a minute later, Tomo came marching back out, trembling and wide-eyed, but without making a sound. She held up her coin, and everyone applauded, mostly in relief. Alexandra was actually impressed, and would have nodded at the younger girl, except when Tomo's eyes fell on her, her expression hardened, so Alexandra just stared coldly back at her. Tomo looked away.

"Congratulations, everyone!" Sue's cheeriness seemed completely out of place. "You've all passed our initiation rituals."

"We've weeded out the weak, the fainthearted, the cowardly," said John. "Those of you who are left are ready for serious study of the Dark Arts."

Some of the kids looked eager. Most merely looked relieved at having passed their ordeal. A few looked apprehensive. Only Alexandra looked doubtful. But she said nothing.

"The next time we meet, you'll learn your first true curse. And by true, I mean powerful, and 'Dark' according to Confederation law. Meaning, illegal," John continued.

That made Alexandra wonder again where Darla had learned – or tried to learn – the Killing Curse. They weren't even allowed to look up the names of forbidden curses in the library.

"Now, everyone head back to the academy," Sue instructed. "And for gosh sakes, don't be too obvious when you sneak back in!"

"But hurry," urged Wayne Reeves. He was one of the older Mors Mortis Society members, and Alexandra didn't like him. He was always giving her particularly creepy looks, which were very different from Maximilian's disapproving scowls. "We're going to add a little something to the Halloween festivities. Something to spook the sheep."

Alexandra had no idea what he was talking about, but decided she didn't care. She wanted to get inside, and try to sleep off the thoughts the Boggart had put into her head. She was hoping those images wouldn't reappear in her dreams.

As students made their way through the trees, and came out of the woods all around the school, Alexandra heard noises behind her, and spun around to see Stuart and Torvald following her.

"Make it more obvious, why don't you?" she snapped.

They shrugged. Stuart grinned, though his grin lacked conviction. "There's only so far we can space ourselves out," he pointed out. "Let's just make a run for it, okay, Troublesome?"

“Stop calling me that.”

Before the boys could reply, they all heard a shout, back the way they'd come.

“MORSMORDRE!”

They looked back, and saw a flash of green light. This was followed by a burst of light in the sky that bathed them all in an eerie emerald glow, and sent flickering green shadows across Charmbridge's lawns. The academy itself glowed as if illuminated by the light of a sickly green moon.

In the sky above them, a gigantic green skull looked down mockingly on the school. A fiery green snake slithered out of its mouth, moving slowly, like an animated fireworks display.

“That's creepy,” Alexandra remarked. It also looked vaguely familiar, though she couldn't recall where she'd seen it before.

“That's Dark magic, all right,” muttered Stuart. “We'd better get inside, fast!”

The three of them ran across the lawn. They could see other fleeing Mors Mortis Society members doing the same. By now, almost all students were inside; only seniors who had turned eighteen had no curfew on weekends, and even they had to sign in and out. But the faculty hadn't reacted yet by the time Alexandra, Stuart, and Torvald made it to the nearest entrance and paused to catch their breaths, in a hallway near the gym.

“You know what that was, right?” Torvald panted.

“A big green skull,” Alexandra replied.

“Duh,” Stuart snorted. “It was a Dark Mark.”

Uneasily, Alexandra remembered where she'd seen a picture of that skull-and-snake image. "A Dark Mark? That was the sign used by that Dark Lord guy in Britain, right?"

The two boys nodded. "Death Eaters used it there. A few copycats did here, too, but it was outlawed," Stuart explained.

He was interrupted by alarm bells, which suddenly began ringing throughout the school.

"Oh, crap!" Torvald swore.

They heard footsteps upstairs, and doors opening. From the administrative wing, they could hear adults yelling, and then Miss Marmsley's voice sounded over the Wizard Wireless Address System: "All students, meet in the front foyer lined up by grade, immediately. Anyone still in their room in two minutes risks being ejected into the hallway, in whatever state of dress they happen to be in. Do not forget your wands."

"We are so screwed," Alexandra groaned.

"They'll think we're Dark wizards for sure, now," Torvald murmured, not looking entirely displeased.

Alexandra scowled. "We need to get to our dorms and join the other kids, without being caught. I don't want anyone thinking I'm Dark."

"You mean besides the half of the school that already does?" Stuart snickered.

Alexandra glared at him. "That's not funny." She leaned around the corner, and when she saw the coast was clear, for the moment, she began creeping down the hallway.

Stuart and Torvald followed. "Well, you do have a reputation, and you have to admit, you kind of seem to enjoy it," Stuart persisted.

"I do not! And no one with any brains thinks I'm Dark."

Ahead, they saw Tomo cutting across the corridor in front of them, having entered the academy through some other set of doors. She glanced their way, and then quickened her pace in the opposite direction, pausing only to whisper, "Pictogel," before dashing past one of the portraits hanging near the stairs.

"She does," said Stuart.

Alexandra snorted.

"No, seriously," Stuart insisted, and he did sound serious. Alexandra looked sideways at him, and then hurried on, trying to reach Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall and leave the two boys behind.

They continued to follow her. "You know Boggarts take the form of whatever you fear most, right?"

"I figured that out, thanks," Alexandra muttered. The last thing she wanted to talk about was what she had seen when she faced the Boggart.

"Well, I caught a glimpse of Tomo's Boggart when she was coming out," Stuart whispered, just before they reached the stairs. Already, they could hear kids pouring into the hallways, on all floors.

"So?" Alexandra demanded.

"So," Stuart answered somberly. "Her Boggart looked like you."

Dark Arts

Normally, the magical chimes now echoing throughout the school were used only to signal the start and end of class periods. They had an emergency evacuation drill once a year, though Alexandra had always wondered why they couldn't just use magic to put out fires or divert a tornado. But it was obvious to everyone that this was not a drill.

Students were spilling into the hallways in a sleepy daze. The chaos helped the returning Mors Mortis Society members. Alexandra mingled with the other girls pouring down the stairs from Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall, and hardly anyone seemed to notice that she was fully dressed.

Anna did, however. Wearing a robe tightly wrapped around herself, and fuzzy red slippers, she shuffled towards Alexandra with an odd expression. "Where have you been?" she asked.

"Just out, with some other kids," Alexandra muttered.

Anna looked confused and a little hurt, but there was no opportunity for her to question Alexandra further. Janet Jackson was loudly demanding to know what was going on, almost in a panic. Sonja Rackham rubbed her eyes sleepily and told Janet to quit shouting. Constance and Forbearance, wearing heavy robes over their long sleeping gowns, walked barefoot down the hall, hastily pushing loose strands of hair back up beneath their nightcaps. They looked worried as they caught up to Alexandra and Anna.

"What in heaven's name's goin' on?" asked Constance.

"Is anyone hurt?" asked Forbearance.

"What makes you think I know?" Alexandra snapped, a little too sharply. Both girls jumped at her tone, and Anna stared at her.

"Where's Angelique?" Alexandra asked suddenly.

"Darla said she's a heavy sleeper," Anna replied, frowning.

"She'd have to be, with a pet jarvey," Alexandra grumbled.

"But Darla... she hain't there to wake her up," Constance said.

"Could she really saw wood through all this?" Forbearance sounded incredulous, as they looked around at the commotion filling the hallway.

"You guys go on, I'll get her," Alexandra sighed, and ran upstairs, to her room. She entered, walked through the bathroom, and banged her fist on the door to Darla and Angelique's room.

In response, she heard Honey scream: "Quiet! Lazy blob sleeping!"

"Angelique, wake up!" Alexandra shouted, and banged on the door again.

Honey shouted back, "Crawl into a hole and die!"

Alexandra gritted her teeth and opened the door.

Angelique was just a lump under her blankets. Her half of the room was a mess, with books, clothes, Halloween candy wrappers, and a plate full of cookie crumbs sitting on the floor. In contrast, Darla's bed was neatly made, and her entire half the room, decorated in pink and yellow and silver, looked clean and untouched.

"Mudblood go home!" shrieked Honey, from her cage at the foot of Angelique's bed.

"How would you like to be flushed down the toilet, you big talking rat?" Alexandra snapped at the jarvey.

Honey's response was a string of words that made even Alexandra blush. She shook her head and yanked the covers off of Angelique. "How can you possibly sleep through all this?" she yelled.

Angelique was lying on her stomach, with a soft velvet mask covering her eyes. She stirred a little, and one hand flopped around by her

side, trying to grab the blanket that had suddenly been pulled from her. She didn't make a sound, though, and Alexandra realized that she must have put a Silencing Charm on herself, rather than Honey.

“Wake up, you idiot!” Alexandra shouted. The sleeping girl's buttocks were sticking up in the air, so Alexandra pointed her wand and muttered something she'd learned at one of the Mors Mortis Society meetings. Angelique practically flew upright, standing up on her bed and shrieking silently. She tore her mask off with one hand and rubbed her bottom with the other. When she saw Alexandra, her eyes went wide.

Alexandra smirked, but then felt guilty almost immediately. The other girl didn't just look startled and angry – she looked terrified. She grabbed her wand from under her pillow, and a moment, Alexandra thought she was going to hex her back, but she merely flicked it rapidly in front of her face, dispelling the Silencing Charm.

“What do you think you're doing, Alexandra?” she shouted, and then she froze, as she heard the bells ringing.

“Look at that booty jiggle!” snickered Honey.

“We have to line up outside now,” Alexandra told her. “It's pretty stupid casting a charm so you can't hear anything going on around you.”

“Stupid as a troll!” agreed Honey.

Angelique stumbled off of her bed – Alexandra almost had to catch her to keep her from tumbling to the floor – and staggered towards her closet. “You didn't have to hex my behind!” she mumbled indignantly.

“Stars above, what a behind! It's the size of Texarcana!” exclaimed Honey.

“I can't believe what you put up with from that thing,” Alexandra muttered, glaring at the jarvey.

Honey uttered a particularly foul-mouthed retort. Alexandra looked at Angelique, who was yawning and digging through her closet. "Angelique, hurry up!"

"Stop shouting at me!"

"I'm not shouting!"

"Yes you –"

The door to the hallway outside suddenly opened, and Alexandra and Angelique floated off the ground. They both cried out as they were tossed out into the hallway by an invisible force. Most of the other seventh grade girls had already gone downstairs; a few who were trailing the rest looked over their shoulders, and snickered. Angelique had been wearing nothing more than a skimpy halter top that left her belly exposed, and a very tight pair of underpants, and now she was sprawled out half-naked in the hallway.

She shrieked and tried to cover herself up, then jumped to her feet and tried to run back into her room, but the door slammed shut and wouldn't reopen, despite Angelique's desperate pounding and screaming.

"Guess Miss Marmsley wasn't bluffing." Alexandra was amused in spite of herself.

"Honey!" Angelique cried. "What if it's a fire or a tornado?"

"We should be so lucky," Alexandra muttered, as Honey screamed more abuse from behind the door.

Angelique turned and gave her a furious scowl. "Look at me! I'm practically naked!"

"I can see that." Alexandra smirked. "So will everyone else in a minute." Angelique was rather proud of having more curves than most girls her age, and she'd made a snide comment or two about Alexandra still looking like a boy. Her smirk faded when she saw the

other girl was on the verge of tears. With a sigh, she shrugged her jacket off and held it out. "Next time, Silence Honey instead."

Angelique glared at her, and took her jacket. They were about the same height, but she struggled to zip up Alexandra's jacket. They walked together downstairs, while Angelique tried desperately to pull the jacket down low enough so it would cover her underwear, without success. On the ground floor, students of all ages were now packing the corridors, and Angelique's bare legs set off a chorus of cheers and whistles from the boys. Angelique flushed and her face turned even darker.

Alexandra noticed that Angelique wasn't the only student who'd apparently not been fast enough in getting out of bed and getting dressed. The Assistant Deans were walking up and down the hallway, conjuring robes and tossing them at boys and girls alike who apparently liked to sleep in something less than a full set of pajamas. This was cause for a lot of laughter and rude humor. Vice Dean Ellis saw Angelique and, shaking his head, conjured a white robe. "Line up with the other seventh graders, Devereaux and Quick," he instructed, as Angelique hastily slipped into the offered robe.

They joined Anna and the Pritchards in line. Alexandra covered her mouth to stifle laughter, as she saw David wearing one of those thin white robes. It came down to his knees; below it, his feet and legs were bare. He gave her a sour look. Constance and Forbearance were blushing furiously, and seemed to be trying to keep their eyes fixed on the ceiling, rather than at all the half-dressed students around them.

"This better not be just a drill," David grumbled.

"You'd rather it be a real emergency?" Anna asked.

"If they dragged us out of bed naked for a drill, I'm gonna be PO'ed, is all."

"You sleep naked?" Alexandra raised an eyebrow, and Constance and Forbearance both turned even redder, while Angelique giggled. David glared at her.

“Not naked!”

“He was in his underwear,” said Dylan Weitzner, David's roommate.

“And what are you laughing for?” David snorted at Angelique.

“Quiet, everyone!” Laughter and conversation died, as Dean Grimm's voice boomed out loud over the chaos. “You will all line up by grade, and you will cease all conversation immediately!”

Conversation didn't cease, but it became hushed whispers, fading abruptly to silence as Ms. Gale or one of the teachers walked by. The line of seventh graders, like the sixth and eighth graders next to them, seemed to be moving slowly into the entrance foyer, but they couldn't see what was happening ahead.

“What do you think is going on?” whispered Anna.

“I don't know!” whispered Alexandra back, a little too vehemently.

Anna blinked at her, and then Mr. Grue, looking more unhappy than any of the students at having been dragged out of bed, bellowed, “Quiet, Quick!” loudly enough to echo up and down the hallway they were in and the next ones over as well. Alexandra fumed as she heard snickers, though those died rapidly as well when Grue glared in their direction. She spotted Stuart and Torvald, still fully dressed like her, standing in line with the other eighth graders. They exchanged glances, and then looked away.

The front doors opened, letting in a gust of chilly air. Everyone craned their heads, to see Ms. Shirtliffe, Mr. Fledgefield, and Miss Gambola marching in, all carrying brooms. They disappeared into the interior of the academy, without speaking to anyone else.

When the students reached the foyer, they saw that Dean Black was at the head of the seventh graders' line. Likewise, the Deans of all the other grades were waiting for every student to come before them, one by one. As they got closer, Alexandra could see the Deans taking each student's wand, holding their own wands in the other hand, and

repeating the same incantation over and over. It seemed to cause flickering light and occasionally a misty image to emerge from the students' wands. Alexandra couldn't quite hear the spell they were casting, and it didn't sound familiar.

Alexandra's friends each walked up to Dean Black, who did the same with their wands, seemed satisfied, and handed them back. When it was Alexandra's turn, he held out his hand, and wordlessly, she handed her hickory wand over.

Dean Black touched the tip of his wand to Alexandra's. "Prior Incantato."

A familiar-looking sparkly flash of light emerged from the tip of her wand, and he looked at her.

"That's not a school-approved spell, Miss Quick," he said. "Where did you learn a Snapping Hex, and who were you hexing?"

Alexandra looked guiltily at Angelique, who glared back at her, unconsciously rubbing her bottom.

"From Maximilian King," she blurted out, with a burst of inspiration. "He was teaching us a few dirty tricks in JROC. You know, for when someone isn't dueling fair."

Dean Black looked at her and frowned. "I'm not sure Ms. Shirtliffe would approve," he muttered. He checked her wand again for the spells she'd cast previously, which were nothing more than light and fireworks charms, and then handed it back and waved her away. "Get back in line."

Feeling smug, Alexandra rejoined her friends. She knew that even if Dean Black did check her story, Maximilian wouldn't dare tell on her.

Everyone was left standing in the hallways for over an hour, while every single student's wand was examined. Alexandra now knew what they were looking for. She wasn't sure which of the Mors Mortis Society members had cast that Dark Mark, but she spied Dean Price

talking very sternly to Tomo, and wondered what the wands of other MMS members would reveal.

At a quarter to two, Dean Grimm announced over the Wizard Wireless PA that they were all to return to their rooms, and that all off-campus privileges for the weekend were suspended, even for seniors. Amidst general grumbling, muttering, and yawning, the Charmbridge student body flowed back to their dorms and fell into their beds.

The next morning, the bulletin boards announced a school-wide assembly immediately after breakfast. Since this was a Saturday, there was much groaning and protesting. But there were also murmurs and hushed conversations, as news of the Dark Mark had finally gotten around the school.

“Great, so we've got some wizard supremacists right here at Charmbridge!” David declared angrily. “I hope they find whoever's responsible and boot them out permanently!”

“Yeah,” Alexandra mumbled uncomfortably. Anna was quiet, occasionally glancing at her with a troubled expression. She tried to ignore her roommate's worry as they ate breakfast and then trudged from the cafeteria to the auditorium, where Dean Grimm was dressed in formal witch's robes, and joined by all the other Deans on the podium at the center of the circular amphitheater.

“I'd like to talk to all of you about history, hatred, and the Dark Arts,” Dean Grimm said, once everyone was seated. She looked particularly severe this morning, and her voice cut through all conversations immediately. The room fell silent.

“Ten years ago, Lord Voldemort was killed, in a battle that took place at a school much like this one, where students your age fought and died. He and his forces were defeated, after seizing control of the British Ministry of Magic and inflicting enormous suffering on the wizarding and Muggle communities alike in that country.” Grimm looked around, her expression daring anyone to be looking away or whispering to a neighbor, but all eyes were on her.

“Sadly, the prejudices that led to the rise of the Death Eater regime are not confined to Britain. We have pureblood supremacists here, too, as well as radical separatists, integration extremists, and various other political dissident groups in the Confederation. We also have Dark wizards, from mentally disturbed loners with grudges to cabals of would-be Voldemort imitators.”

Alexandra shifted in her seat. Was it her imagination, or did she feel many eyes on her suddenly? A lot of people thought her father was a would-be Voldemort.

“You have a right to believe what you like, of course,” Dean Grimm went on. “You receive a multicultural education here at Charmbridge because, presumably, your parents believe in the Confederation, and the diversity of wizarding cultures that it represents. It would disappoint me greatly to learn that some of you believe in the sort of barbaric nonsense that has led only to bloodshed and wizard-wars in the past.”

For a moment, her eyes seemed to be lingering on Alexandra, which made her bristle, and then Anna shrank back in her seat, and Alexandra realized Ms. Grimm was not looking at her at all. She glanced forward, and could barely see the top of Tomo's head – she, too, seemed to be cringing where she sat.

“Whatever you may believe, you may not express hatred or threaten violence, nor, as I told you at the beginning of the year, may you practice Dark Arts, regardless of your motives. Last night two students were found to have been casting spells that violate the Charmbridge policy against Dark Arts. They are already on their way home. We have evidence that other students have also been dabbling in forbidden magic. And those of you who've been sneaking around after curfew – you know who you are – should know that several of your classmates were caught and are now on probation, and if you continue, you all will be.”

“Let me make this very clear – if you practice Dark Arts, you will be expelled! If you know about someone practicing Dark Arts and you don't report it, you will be expelled. Every year, some of you think you're clever enough to get away with it. You are not, I assure you.”

Eventually, the Dean finished lecturing them, and they were released. Alexandra caught sight of John Manuelito as they were leaving the auditorium, and she was certain he was smirking.

Alexandra didn't like the way Anna, Constance, and Forbearance seemed to fall silent suddenly when she joined them for a game of Witches' Whist in the rec room. And in the cafeteria at lunch, their whispered conversation with David ended abruptly when she sat down next to them.

There was a Quidditch game that afternoon, and though Alexandra would rather have practiced flying on her own, or watched the Quodpot game, she and Anna and the Pritchards had once again acquiesced to David's plea to come watch the game.

As usual, he didn't play, but that didn't prevent him from correcting all the errors both teams had made, as he verbally replayed the entire game while they walked back to the academy. Alexandra was barely paying attention, until Anna cleared her throat, and asked, "Alex, are you all right?"

Alexandra paused, and everyone slowed to a halt. Even David stopped talking about Quidditch.

"I'm fine," Alexandra replied, frowning. "Why?"

Anna exchanged a look with the Pritchards, and Alexandra felt her temper give way, aggravated by her guilty conscience. "Is there something you want to say?" she demanded, in a belligerent tone that made Anna take a step back.

"I heard what you said to Mr. Black." Anna was having trouble meeting her gaze. "Maximilian's never taught us any new hexes in JROC."

Alexandra frowned.

"You were out late Halloween night, just like you've been out late lots of other nights –"

"Maybe I've actually been studying. Maybe I actually have some other friends besides you." Alexandra immediately regretted saying that, as Anna looked stung and hurt. But she was angry.

"All right, Alexandra," Forbearance sighed. "Let's just put it on the table."

"And if we got the wrong inferrin', you can be raged as you like," said Constance.

"We'll 'pologize," Forbearance said.

"And hope you can forgive us." Constance looked down.

"But you got us all a'fretted for you," Forbearance finished, with a deep breath.

"You don't need to worry about me," Alexandra told them. "Whatever you're worried about –"

"Did you have anything to do with that Dark Mark?" David demanded.

The other girls winced. Constance and Forbearance seemed to be holding their breaths. Anna looked fearful.

Alexandra stared at him, then finally broke the silence. "I can't believe you're asking me that."

David met her gaze, his jaw twitching nervously.

Her voice rose. "I'm a Mudblood too, or have you forgotten?"

"So you aren't involved with the Mors Mortis Society?" Anna swallowed, and looked pale.

"Alexandra Quick, are you practicin' Dark magic?" Constance asked.

Alexandra looked at them. Her first impulse was to say, "No," but she just couldn't lie to her friends' faces. Maybe, technically, she hadn't

actually performed any Dark magic yet, but the memory of the words she'd almost shouted at the Boggart replayed over and over in her mind.

"I am not Dark!" she protested. "I am not into wizard supremacy or anything like that! That's stupid! I'm not doing anything wrong."

Her voice quavered a bit with the last statement, and she knew they could all hear it. She struggled to meet their gazes and not look away.

"Then," said Constance quietly, "tell us you hain't been practicin' Dark Arts, and got no truck with them that do."

"Tell us you hain't got no part in that fearful mark and you got no truck with them who did it," Forbearance insisted, just as quietly.

"Just tell us that, on your witch's honor," Constance implored.

"And that'll be the end of it," Forbearance agreed, nodding.

Alexandra's mouth was as dry as dust. She swallowed, and it felt as if her tongue were caught in her throat. She met their eyes, but no words would come out.

"Alex," Anna pleaded.

"Alex," David groaned.

Alexandra looked down.

There was a long silence. Then Constance said, in a tight voice, "We best get inside." She and Forbearance bowed their heads and walked away with hurried steps.

Alexandra looked up at David and Anna. David looked at her, shook his head, and turned to follow the Ozarkers.

"Alex," Anna begged. "Just say you're done with them. You'll quit, right?"

Alexandra frowned at her. She knew she should. What kind of idiots conjured a Dark Mark just to freak out the school? But being put on the defensive, having her friends ambush her like this, angered her, and it was her stubbornness that ruled the moment.

I'm doing this to protect you! she thought angrily, but she didn't know what would happen if she told Anna about Tomo. She was skeptical about the 'cursed' secrecy contract, but being unsure, and angry at being cornered, she said nothing.

Anna sniffed, wiped at her eyes, and hurried after David and the Pritchards, holding back tears.

At dinner, Alexandra started to sit down with her friends. Constance and Forbearance immediately moved down the table, without looking at her. David got up and moved his tray to sit on the other side of Anna, who didn't move, but didn't look at her.

Only Angelique remained sitting where she was, across the table. Everyone had learned that afternoon that Darla had been officially expelled; she had, in fact, been sent back to Chicago on the Charmbridge bus the night before. Now Angelique looked a little lonely and forlorn. She managed a halfhearted smile. "Hi, Alexandra."

"Hi," Alexandra replied. "Sorry about the hex."

Angelique grimaced, looked down at her plate, and pushed her half-eaten dinner away.

"You're not fat, you know," Alexandra told her. "You really shouldn't listen to Honey."

Angelique sighed, and got up from the table. "I need to pack Darla's things," she mumbled, and left. Alexandra ate the rest of her meal alone, in silence.

She thought Anna would continue giving her the silent treatment when they turned in for the night. Anna was quiet, at first, and then, while Alexandra was feeding Charlie and stroking the raven's neck, Anna asked, "Why, Alex?"

Alexandra turned around, eyes flaring, but Anna just looked sad and worried.

Alexandra forced herself to relax. "I didn't put up that Dark Mark. I didn't know it was going to happen." She didn't think that was revealing any secrets of the Mors Mortis Society. Nothing happened to her when she said that, anyway.

Anna nodded, but persisted. "That doesn't answer my question."

Alexandra sighed. "Can't you trust me?"

There was a very long pause, as Anna stared at her, and then to Alexandra's surprise, Anna walked forward and put her arms around her roommate.

"I do," she whispered. "I trust you not to intend anything bad. But I worry about you!"

"You're not my mother," Alexandra sighed, with a mixture of affection and exasperation, patting Anna on the back.

"Why can't you trust me?" Anna sniffled, her face still pressed against her. "Why can't you tell me what's going on?"

Alexandra hesitated.

"I just can't."

Anna slowly stepped back, and looked up at her, very seriously. Then she nodded slowly.

"All right, Alex." And she climbed into bed, while Alexandra set Charlie back in the cage. As Alexandra got into bed, Anna said, "Good night."

"Good night, Anna."

The Pritchards continued giving Alexandra the cold shoulder. They were never rude and never said a bad word about her; they simply didn't talk to her. Alexandra's heart was heavy, but she didn't try to force the issue. Likewise, David merely glared at her, and occasionally muttered things under his breath. He was busy with ASPEW and Quidditch, and had made more friends among the other boys, but Alexandra still felt the loss of his friendship acutely. It reminded her of when Brian turned against her.

I should quit, she told herself, and resolved that that was what she was going to do. The Mors Mortis Society wasn't worth losing her friends. She would go to one more meeting, she decided, just to find out what sorts of things they really taught – the “real Dark Arts” that they had promised, after initiation – and then her curiosity would be satisfied. She hated the thought of Maximilian's smirking face when she finally gave up, and she worried a little about Tomo, Stuart, and Torvald all learning curses that she wouldn't know about, but she'd just have to find another way to defend herself – and Anna, if need be.

A week passed without any more messages from her MMS coin. She saw John and Sue and all the other Mors Mortis members around the school – in fact, she learned that of the two students who had been expelled after Halloween night, only one of them had been in the Mors Mortis Society, and he was the eighth grader who'd quit after failing to face the Boggart. So whoever had created the Dark Mark had somehow avoided detection afterwards.

It was not until the following week that the coin signaled another meeting, that Saturday night. Alexandra could tell that Maximilian was tense about it; he had eased off a bit on the new wands since Halloween, but that week he was back to harassing Alexandra and Anna relentlessly, and shouting at them until even Colonel Shirliffe told him to back off a little, after Anna nearly collapsed in tears one afternoon.

Alexandra chased him down after JROC drill that day. He was walking down the corridor with Martin and Adelaide. A gaggle of Charmbridge girls was following, flirting with the two BMI boys as they always did.

Alexandra rolled her eyes, and shouted, “Max!”

The Stormcrows stopped and turned around. The older girls stared at Alexandra, while Maximilian looked furious.

“We're still in uniform, Quick!” he barked at her.

“Sorry, Mage-Sergeant – oops, Mage-Corporal King,” she sneered, stressing his newly reduced rank. “I want to talk to you!”

“Quick –” Witch-Sergeant Speir growled, but Maximilian shook his head and held up a hand.

“It's all right, Ade,” he muttered. He closed the distance between them in two long strides, grabbed Alexandra roughly by the elbow, half-lifting her off the ground, and marched her away from the others.

“Ow!” she hissed, struggling in his grip. “Let go of me!”

“Don't you ever shout at me like that again, Quick!” he hissed back, and practically threw her against the wall of the corridor. He leaned over her, his eyes blazing. Furiously, he grabbed her by the front of her uniform and yanked her up onto her toes, so her face was directly below his, and for a moment, she thought he might actually start choking or beating her. “Don't you ever mock me like that in front of my fellow mages again, and don't you ever, ever disrespect me in public!” He shook her with each word. “Do. You. Understand. Me?”

Too stunned to say anything else, she just nodded, as her head was jerked back and forth. “Y–yes.”

He stopped shaking her. She stared up at him in shock. He'd completely lost it.

Maximilian looked into her wide, startled eyes, and the rage that had radiated from him a moment ago seemed to dissipate. He exhaled slowly, and released her. She rubbed her neck, where her collar had been constricting her.

“What did you want to talk to me about?” he grated, through his teeth.

She licked her lips and cleared her throat. "If you want to beat me up or take out your anger issues on me, fine, but leave Anna alone."

He blinked, and stared at her. She stared back.

"Go ahead," she dared him, lifting her chin. "I can take whatever you can dish out, you big fat bully. But Anna doesn't deserve it."

Maximilian continued staring at her, then his mouth curled into a small smile. "And you do?"

That response wasn't what she'd expected, so now she was the one blinking in surprise.

"I don't care if you've got a problem with me because of my father, or because you don't like girls, or whatever," she said, and she almost backed away, when his face suddenly clouded over again. "But I want you to stop picking on Anna."

He regarded her for several moments, as his face regained its normal color. Then he said, "Chu is a weak little whiner."

"She is not!" Alexandra shouted. "And don't you ever talk about her like that again!" Now it was her eyes blazing with fury. Maximilian paused at that, and then he smiled.

"You want me to ease up on Chu?" He lowered his voice. "Quit the Mors Mortis Society."

"Why?" she whispered. "Why do you care what I do? And if you think it's so bad, why are you there?"

"Max, are you done with the new wand yet?" called Adelaide, from down the hall. They both looked up, to see the BMI girl watching them, with her hands on her hips. "Drag her off to another Saturday remedial training session if she needs more attitude adjustment."

"I may do that," Maximilian muttered, and he stalked away to join the waiting Stormcrows.

Alexandra stewed over her confrontation with Maximilian for the next few days, trying to decide what to do, and wondering just what his issues were.

Friday morning, she found her name on the bulletin board again, summoned to the Dean's office after breakfast.

"I didn't do anything," she said to Anna, automatically, as they stood in front of the board. Anna just sighed and didn't say anything, which left Alexandra feeling even more put out as they proceeded on to breakfast. Constance and Forbearance still weren't talking to her, and David just rolled his eyes and shook his head at her from down the table. Angelique had been very quiet for the past couple of weeks, and simply nodded to Alexandra and Anna as they sat down.

You'd think she'd enjoy having a room to herself, Alexandra thought, but she knew that Angelique probably missed Darla.

After breakfast, she went to the Dean's office, and sat down stiffly at the bench where Miss Marmsley told her to, looking like a proper JROC witch in her freshly pressed uniform. A minute later, Dean Grimm opened her door and called Alexandra into her office. Alexandra marched in, but paused when she found Darla there, standing in front of the Dean's desk. Startled, she looked at Ms. Grimm, who had walked back behind her desk and was now sitting down in her brown leather chair.

"Good morning, Miss Quick," the Dean greeted her pleasantly, which immediately put Alexandra on guard. She glanced at Galen. The black cat was sitting on the Dean's desk, and was giving Darla a narrow, cat-like stare, almost completely ignoring Alexandra.

"Good morning, Ms. Grimm," she replied, eyes narrowed suspiciously. She looked at Darla again, who was wearing much more stylish clothes than the dueling outfit Alexandra had last seen her in. The other girl seemed to have styled her hair again recently; it was now hanging in tight black spiral curls around her face. What was most

noticeable about her, though, was her red eyes; she looked like she'd been crying.

"Miss Quick, Miss Dearborn has something to say to you," Dean Grimm prompted.

Alexandra frowned, and turned to look at Darla, puzzled.

Darla raised her head and met Alexandra's gaze, tearfully. "I'm sorry, Alexandra," she said. "I'm really, really sorry! I wasn't trying to kill you, honest! I'm so sorry if I scared you or hurt you. I was so stupid and irresponsible. It was the most awful thing I've ever done, and I'll never do anything like it again."

Alexandra stared at her, looked at Ms. Grimm, who was watching the two girls expressionlessly, and at Galen, whose tail was flicking this way and that, and then looked back at Darla.

"If you weren't trying to kill me," she asked, "then why did you try to cast a Killing Curse?"

"You have to be a grown witch to actually kill someone with it, and you have to be really good at magic, and you definitely have to have practiced with it," Darla replied. "That's what I read, anyway." She looked down. "I thought when I cast it, I'd probably just scare you, or maybe give you a nosebleed at worst. I just wanted to beat you, for once."

Alexandra stared at the other girl some more, then turned back to the Dean, confused.

"Miss Dearborn is not entirely correct, as I've already explained to her." Ms. Grimm's tone was sharp. "It's true that it's very unlikely that an untrained twelve-year-old would be able to throw an actual Killing Curse. But that spell is one of the most dangerous of all Dark Arts. There's a reason it's known as an Unforgivable. No one should ever, ever attempt it, because there is no defense against it. With enough power behind it, the Killing Curse will strike anyone dead."

Alexandra just continued looking at the Dean, while Darla sniffled.

"That apology was one of the conditions of Miss Dearborn returning to Charmbridge Academy," Ms. Grimm said, lifting Galen and setting the cat down on her lap, and then straightening some papers on her desk.

Alexandra gaped. "You mean she's not expelled anymore?"

The Dean looked up. "Her parents appealed her expulsion, and after hearings before the Board of Magical Education, the Juvenile Magical Offenses Division, and a meeting with the Governor, it was determined that her actions were reckless, irresponsible, and showed willful ignorance, but she did not have murderous intent. It has been decided that Miss Dearborn will be placed on probation for twelve months, and conditionally reinstated at Charmbridge. Any further offenses, of course, will not only result in immediate expulsion, but possible criminal charges as well. Miss Dearborn understands that, don't you, dear?"

Darla nodded. "Yes, Ms. Grimm," she murmured, in a small voice.

"She'll also be serving detention for the rest of the semester, and is forbidden to participate in any extracurricular activities," Grimm went on. She nodded at Darla. "That's all, Miss Dearborn. You may return to your room now. I'm sure Miss Devereaux will be delighted to see you."

"Yes, ma'am." Darla glanced at Alexandra, and then shuffled out of the Dean's office, head down.

Alexandra was dumbstruck, and said nothing even after Darla had left.

"You don't look happy, Miss Quick," Grimm said, in a pleasant tone. "Are you not satisfied with the sincerity of your friend's apology?"

Alexandra frowned. Right now, she was not at all sure that 'friend' was even remotely accurate in describing her relationship with Darla.

"I'm just wondering," she responded, trying to match Grimm's light, conversational tone, "if you'd let me back into Charmbridge after I tried to cast a Killing Curse at someone."

Grimm stared at her without blinking, then replied, in a much flatter tone, "If you cast a Killing Curse at someone, Alexandra, I think it's much more likely that someone would be dead."

Alexandra frowned. She wasn't sure how to take that.

"I guess it's a good thing Darla has parents who can appeal to the Board of Magical Education and the Governor," she said. "Since my mother is just a Muggle, I don't suppose she'd be able to do that. And I'm guessing an appeal from my father wouldn't help me much."

"No," Grimm replied dryly. "It probably wouldn't." She folded her hands on her desk. "Life is unfair, Miss Quick. If you're afraid of Miss Dearborn, I can arrange –"

"I'm not afraid of Darla!" Alexandra protested scornfully, and paused, as Ms. Grimm's eyes flashed angrily for a moment at the interruption. But the Dean didn't say anything, so Alexandra continued. "And I know life's not fair. Your sister dropped by to remind me of that, this summer."

Ms. Grimm narrowed her eyes. "Is there anything else you'd like to say?"

Alexandra opened her mouth, then closed it. "It has been decided," Ms. Grimm had said. Not, "I have decided." Had the Dean been forced to allow Darla back, against her wishes?

"No, Ms. Grimm."

"Are you sure?" Grimm raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps you have concerns about Dark Arts?"

Alexandra tensed. "Why – why would you think I have concerns about that?"

“Why, because of Miss Dearborn's foolish attempt to use an Unforgivable Curse, of course,” the Dean replied. “I thought perhaps you might be worried that others could be learning magic they shouldn't be learning, and the danger that would pose to you, and your friends.”

Alexandra stared at her, swallowed, and shook her head. “No, Ms. Grimm. I'm not worried about that.”

Grimm was silent for a long moment, while her hand idly scratched Galen's ears, and then she said, “Well then. How are you enjoying JROC?”

“Not so much,” Alexandra muttered.

“Really?” Grimm half-smiled. “Well, it's character-building. Dismissed, Miss Quick.”

Alexandra almost offered her a sarcastic JROC salute, but thought better of it, and pivoted about and departed the Dean's office without another word.

Darla's return to Charmbridge generated gossip throughout the school. Alexandra had never realized how wealthy and influential the Dearborns were, but apparently they were major shareholders in Grundy's, her father was a Colonial Bank of the New World executive, and she had an uncle in the Wizards' Congress.

Alexandra wasn't sure how she felt about Darla's return. She wanted to believe that Darla hadn't really intended to kill her. She couldn't help thinking that the rich girl looked a little smug at dinner, though – as if she had gotten away with something. Constance and Forbearance had politely said hello to her, but stopped short of saying, “Welcome back,” and Alexandra wondered if they were suspicious of Darla's Dark affiliations as well. She and Angelique were chattering as they usually did; Darla was bemoaning the fact that she had detention every evening for the rest of the semester, even on weekends.

“Well, if Alexandra could survive it, you can,” Angelique joked.

"Hah hah." Alexandra didn't sound amused. Darla just looked at her.

"Is it just me, or are Constance and Forbearance being kind of cold?" Darla asked quietly, looking down the table at the Pritchards, who were talking to David.

"I suppose some people might be a little wary of someone who tries to throw a Killing Curse," Alexandra replied. "I know, it seems totally unreasonable, doesn't it?"

Angelique and Anna both froze. Darla blinked at Alexandra, then sighed. "You didn't really accept my apology, did you?"

Alexandra looked back at her, and the tension must have been palpable – up and down the table, and at adjoining tables as well, students were all looking at them, while pretending not to.

"No, I do," she replied. And in a slightly louder voice: "We're friends, right? So if you say you didn't mean any harm and aren't practicing Dark Arts, I should believe you, right?"

Darla blinked again, looked confused for a moment, and then smiled hesitantly. "Right," she echoed.

Constance and Forbearance were both very still, and David was staring at her.

"Detention's not so bad," Alexandra said, getting up from the table. "As long as no one is trying to kill you. I'm sorry I won't be seeing you at any extracurricular activities, though."

As she walked away, she felt Darla's eyes following her, and Constance and Forbearance both looked down as she passed by.

The next day, she spent the morning trying to help Anna do wand drills so Maximilian wouldn't shout at her so much. After Anna tired of that, they spent the afternoon using their wands to create little whirlwinds that scattered the fall leaves outside, playing wizard chess, and then studying for their Alchemy exam the following Monday.

Anna was happy, and Alexandra wanted to put her at ease, hoping she would forget to worry about her, and feeling guilty all the while, knowing she was planning to sneak out that night.

In their room that evening, they heard Honey gleefully abusing Darla once again, while Anna fed owl treats to Jingwei, whom she'd brought down from the aviary. Charlie kept trying to steal some of Jingwei's treats, but Anna's great horned owl was becoming impressively large, and formidable enough to intimidate the raven with a remonstrating hoot.

"You know what? I should teach Charlie to talk," Alexandra said.

Charlie looked at her disdainfully.

"What? I know ravens can talk. You're not going to tell me a parrot is smarter than you, are you?"

"Charlie's not going to tell you anything," said Anna. "Charlie only does what Charlie wants to do, like someone else I know."

Alexandra gave her a narrow look, but Anna just smiled.

Alexandra shook her head and rolled her eyes. "If you talk for me, Charlie, I'll give you lots of owl treats. How about, 'Be quiet, Anna!'"

"How about, 'Behave, Alex!'" Anna suggested.

Charlie seemed to be considering this, while Alexandra snickered and Anna giggled.

"Just as long as Charlie doesn't learn to talk from Honey," Anna whispered, as they heard Honey calling Darla a fat... something bad. Alexandra shook her head.

"Charlie would never be a jerk like that, would you, Charlie?"

"Alexandra," said Charlie.

Both girls jumped, stared at each other, and then at the raven. Even Jingwei blinked her large golden eyes at the smaller bird in surprise.

Alexandra grinned. She reached for a handful of Jingwei's owl treats, withdrawing her hand quickly to avoid the owl's snapping beak, and held them out to Charlie. "How about, 'Alexandra is brilliant, awesome, and wonderful...'"

"... stubborn, troublesome, full of herself..." Anna commented.

The two of them went to bed laughing, feeling better than either of them had in weeks. Anna let Jingwei fly out the window, knowing the owl would go hunt and then find her way back to the aviary on her own. Alexandra smiled as she curled up under the blankets, but her smile faded as she remembered her secret meeting, in less than an hour.

When the time came, she listened carefully to the sound of Anna's breathing, and only began to throw her covers back when she was sure that her roommate was really asleep. Charlie stirred in the cage hanging by the window, and cooed, "Alexandra."

"Shh," Alexandra whispered pleadingly. The raven did some feather-fluffing, and then became still again.

With the utmost stealth, Alexandra opened the door to the hallway outside, slipped through, and shut it again. She then took out her MMS coin and followed it to the same stairwell she'd taken to go to their first meeting, in the lowest basement. Her feelings were decidedly mixed when she found Darla going down those same stairs.

"So, you haven't given up Dark Arts after all," Alexandra accused.

"You haven't either," Darla whispered back, as they began descending the stairs.

"I'm not practicing Dark Arts!" Alexandra retorted. "I just want to find out what the Mors Mortis Society teaches. I want to find out if they actually know anything. I'm certainly not going to be casting any Unforgivable Curses!"

Darla looked at her. "I told you –"

"Yeah, I know." Alexandra waved a hand dismissively. "Fine, you were being stupid. Like now. If you get caught, you're going to be expelled."

"We'll all be expelled if we're caught," Darla pointed out.

They went deeper into Charmbridge's basements, and lowered their voices to whispers. "The house-elves are down here," Alexandra whispered, as they reached the first basement level.

"But not in the levels below," Darla whispered back. "They're afraid of the lower levels, especially the room we met in."

"How do you know that?" Alexandra asked.

"John told me."

Alexandra frowned, as they crept down another set of steps. It was dark and quiet, and Alexandra and Darla both looked at their coins occasionally, in the light shed by their wands. When they reached the rocky corridor they'd followed last time, Alexandra looked ahead, and saw once more a pair of figures wearing robes and cowls.

"I thought we're already initiated," Alexandra objected, as the two girls reached the Mors Mortis lookouts.

"You are," said a muffled voice that Alexandra nonetheless recognized as that of Tony Masterson, a tenth grader. "We're here in case non-members or elves show up."

"And you'd do what, exactly?" Alexandra demanded.

Tony just shook his head and gestured for her and Darla to continue on.

The meeting was in the same bare stone room as before, with the disturbing cave paintings on the far wall. Alexandra and Darla weren't

the last arrivals; some of the older kids followed them in, and Tomo once again arrived last. John Manuelito and Sue Fox waited, and Alexandra risked a glance at Maximilian, who didn't seem to be paying her any attention at the moment. He was staring at the drawings of human and animal figures on the wall.

Once everyone was there, John addressed the gathering. "Meetings will be less frequent now – the teachers are more wary, and Ms. Grimm is looking for us. They have magical alarms at all the exits, so they'll know if kids are sneaking in and out after curfew. Tucker and Mindy were careless idiots," he said contemptuously, referring to the two students who had been expelled after Halloween, "which is why Tucker never made it past initiation. You all need to be extra careful."

Alexandra thought it was interesting that John didn't even look at Darla, let alone direct any pointed comments her way, though other kids were certainly looking at her.

"Tonight," he went on, "we learn our first true Dark Art."

Alexandra felt both excitement and wariness. All her reassurances to Anna came back to her, as well as the denial she'd uttered to Darla. She did want to see this. Part of her wanted to learn anything she could learn that would make her more than the equal of other kids. What was a 'Dark Art' anyway, but magic that wasn't approved by the Department of Magical Education?

She saw that some of the other kids looked as apprehensive as she did, or more so. Others just looked eager.

John brandished his wand, and said, "Serpensortia." A large brown snake uncoiled from the end of it, and flopped to the ground in front of him.

Everyone waited. They'd already seen this spell. The snake lifted its head and began swiveling it side to side, sticking its tongue out to taste the air.

Then John pointed his wand at the snake, and said, "Crucio!"

The snake immediately flipped over, and began squirming as if it were on a hot griddle. Its body jerked and spasmed, and it emitted a loud, anguished hissing noise that Alexandra had never heard a snake make before.

Everyone stared. John and Sue's eyes were gleaming. Maximilian wore a cold, unreadable expression. Stuart and Torvald were wincing; Tomo was pale and her eyes were wide, though her face was otherwise a mask. But Alexandra felt a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach, especially when she saw some of the other kids watching with what could only be described as glee.

Finally John lifted his wand, and the snake stopped twisting frantically about. It coiled up, slowly, as if in great pain.

"Tonight, we're going to start learning the Cruciatus Curse," he told them.

"What is that?" Alexandra asked.

"One of the so-called Unforgivables," John replied casually, as if he were discussing a Color-Changing Charm. "It inflicts pain without actually causing injury. Intense pain, but no marks, no matter how long you apply it. You can vary the strength somewhat, but even a 'light' touch with the Cruciatus Curse is agonizing."

He pointed his wand at the snake again. "Now, everyone point your wands with me. You have to hate this snake! We're going to –"

"Stop it," said Alexandra.

John paused, and scowled at her. "What?"

"Are you serious? You're teaching a spell to torture animals?" Alexandra was still staring at the snake. Its tongue flickered in and out, feebly, as if hoping to find a way to escape whatever had just hurt it so badly.

"We have to practice on animals," John replied slowly, as if explaining something to a small child. "It's just a damned snake, Quick. What is it with you and snakes?"

Several kids snickered. Alexandra lifted her gaze to stare directly at him.

"Practice for what?" she asked.

John blinked. "What?"

"If snakes are just for practice, what would you use that spell on normally?"

The snickering stopped. A few kids shifted restlessly.

"Alexandra, if you don't want to learn the Cruciatus Curse, you don't have to," Sue said impatiently. "But stop wasting everyone else's time."

"Right, I wouldn't want to waste your time when you could be spending it torturing things!" Alexandra shouted the last two words, making Darla, next to her, jump. She looked around the room. "This is what you all want to do, practice torturing animals, so you can, what, torture people? Are you crazy?"

"You're a mouthy little brat, Quick," John sneered. "What did you think Dark Arts were, conjuring flowers and bunnies?"

"Look, some magic isn't very nice," Sue said, in a slightly more placating tone, looking around. "But to really understand what magic can do, you have to study the dark stuff too, not just a few school-approved charms and transfigurations."

Alexandra stepped forward, and looked down at the snake. It didn't have a rattle. She hoped it wasn't poisonous. She knelt next to it.

"You've got to be kidding me," John snorted, as Alexandra reached out and carefully grabbed the snake's neck, then picked up the rest of

it. It jerked away from her touch, then coiled around her wrist once she had hold of it, as if seeking something warm and soft to cling to.

"I didn't join this stupid club so I could torture and kill things," she declared. She stood up.

John folded his arms across his chest, still holding his wand, and smirked at her. "Fine, take your new pet back to your room, Quick. I'll just conjure another one."

Alexandra looked around. "Any of you who do this, you're sick. You really should be kicked out of school. And I'll remember all of you." She stared straight at Darla, who looked down, and then at Maximilian, who met her gaze with an unchanging expression, and then at John, who looked incredulous.

"Give me your coin and get out of here, Quick," he snarled.

She untangled one hand from the snake, reached into her pocket, grabbed the red-gold coin that had guided her to the Mors Mortis Society's meetings, and flung it at John, hard. He flinched and raised his hand, to deflect the coin from hitting him in the face, and gave her a look that made her think he was thinking about using the Cruciatus Curse on her. She just sneered at him, but her heart was hammering and her face was flushed. She held her head up, and didn't look at anyone as she left the basement.

Familiars

The snake squirmed a little as Alexandra made her way up the stairs from the deepest basement. She was still holding its neck so that it couldn't reach her with its fangs. She didn't even know whether it had fangs, but thought it would be unwise to take chances.

"Now what am I going to do with you?" she muttered.

Letting it loose on another basement level seemed unwise; she supposed it might eventually make its way to safety, but more likely it would end up dead. Or perhaps bite someone, if it were poisonous. She wished she knew more about snakes. If what John had said about the alarms was true, she couldn't sneak outside to set it free tonight.

"You're just a stupid snake. What am I doing? It's not like you're going to be grateful or anything." She was talking to herself more than to the snake. Then she came to an unexpected dead end. She looked around. Hadn't the stairs to the next level been just around the corner from the ones she took getting up here? She was in a dark tunnel, lit by lanterns at both ends but with the floor barely visible in between, and she'd definitely walked too far. She backtracked, could not find either set of stairs, and sighed. She'd been lost in Charmbridge's basements before; they could be like a maze.

"Now I'll have to wander around in circles, or worse, wait until I run into some of the other kids leaving after the meeting," she told the snake. It flicked its tongue out and in.

She found a room full of old furniture, and another that contained large bins of rough gray pebbles and broken sheet-like pieces of slate – for what purpose, she had no idea. There was an old, unused bathroom, and in a far corner of the basement, which she reached after following yet another wrong turn, a locked office with 'Professor Stiller' painted in faded letters on the door. She had to cast a Light Spell in order to read it. The snake, which had coiled around her wrist as she held it by the neck with her other hand, recoiled from the wand.

Alexandra moved it away from the serpent. "Sorry," she muttered, feeling stupid. A snake couldn't actually recognize a wand as the thing that had hurt it, could it?

She passed a set of double doors with the intriguing sign 'Muggle Room' hanging above it. Like all the other rooms in this basement, it didn't appear to have been used in a long time. When Alexandra pushed the doors open and shined the light from her wand inside, she saw only dust and cobwebs in an empty room.

She finally found stairs going up, breathed a sigh of relief, and climbed to a basement level that looked like the main one, where the custodian's office was located. From here, she was pretty sure, she could eventually find her way back to the first floor.

"Is Miss lost again?"

Alexandra jumped and spun around. The snake twitched in her hand. She pointed her wand, and saw a wizened old house-elf, blinking her large eyes as the light radiating from Alexandra's wand shined into her face.

The elf looked familiar. "Em?" Alexandra stammered.

"Miss remembers Em?" The elf sounded surprised.

"Sure I do. You remember me, don't you?" Em had caught Alexandra wandering around in the basements last year, on an entirely different mission. Then, as now, she had been somewhere she wasn't supposed to be.

"Miss is very memorable," Em chuckled. Then her old eyes widened. "What is that? Where did Miss get it?" she asked in a high-pitched tone, pointing at the snake.

"It's a snake," Alexandra replied. "I found it."

"Where?" Em shrieked, with a panicked expression.

Alexandra took a step back at the elf's reaction. "Here in the basements."

"In this basement?" demanded Em. "Or was Miss in a lower basement?" She stared at the snake, and Alexandra bit her lip, wondering how much the elf might know about what went on in the lower basement levels. "Drop it, Miss, drop it now! Em will get rid of it!"

Alexandra turned, holding the arm with the snake extended away from the elf. "No! You don't need to hurt it! Just let me take it upstairs, and I'll find somewhere safe to put it."

"Em needs to look at this snake, Miss." The elf sounded very serious. "Em needs to make sure it is just a snake."

"What?" Alexandra blinked, confused.

"Mind what Em says!" the elf demanded, in a tone Alexandra had never heard an elf use when speaking to a human before.

"It's just a snake, I'm sure of it," Alexandra insisted stubbornly.

"Miss doesn't know enough to be sure of such things!" the elf snapped. "If Miss found it here in the basements, it could have come from below!"

"What if it did?"

In response, Em pointed at her, and to Alexandra's dismay, she felt herself frozen in place, and then her body slowly twisted around, as her arm swiveled about until she was holding the snake out to the elf. "Stop it!" she cried.

"Em is sorry, Miss," Em said apologetically, "but this is more important than you knows." She sounded pained.

"Please don't hurt it," Alexandra pleaded, and the elf stared at the snake for a moment, before looking up at the girl. She snapped her fingers, and Alexandra was free to move normally again.

"It is just a snake," Em said, and shook her head. "Miss cares about snakes? Miss is such a strange, naughty child."

Alexandra glared at her. "What's the big deal? I'm sure this isn't the first time a snake has gotten into the school."

"No," Em murmured slowly. "It also would not be the first time something from the Lands Below sneaks into the school, looking like a snake."

Alexandra looked at the snake, which was still curled snugly around her wrist and forearm, and back at Em. "The Lands Below?"

Em shook her head. "Em has said too much." She frowned. "Miss has still not explained what she is doing down here."

"I got lost." At least that wasn't a lie. "And I found this snake, and – what are the Lands Below, and what comes out of them looking like a snake?"

"Miss is not answering Em's questions."

"Em is not answering Miss's questions."

Em's eyes narrowed.

"Can you tell me if it's poisonous?" Alexandra asked.

"Miss picks up snakes not knowing if they is poisonous or not?" The elf blinked in astonishment.

"Well, it hasn't bitten me yet."

Em goggled at her, then shook her head. "Em is not a snake handler."

Alexandra sighed, and relaxed her grip a little on the snake's neck. It was being quite docile, and didn't seem inclined to bite.

“Can you show me the way out of here, Em?”

“Em should be reporting Miss to Miz Gale.”

“Please don't,” Alexandra said quickly. “She'd probably make me get rid of the snake – maybe kill it.” She licked her lips. “I'm really not bad. You can ask Bran and Poe.” She had no idea how that would go over – or whether Bran and Poe would appreciate her dropping their names as character references. But she continued pleading with the house-elf, trying to sound desperate (which was easy), and on the verge of tears (which was a little more difficult). “If you tell on me, I'll probably be kicked out of Charmbridge! And... and really bad things will happen.”

That, also, might not be a lie, she thought.

Em stared at her, and then her tiny shoulders slumped. “Will Miss promise Em is not going to find her in the basement again?”

Alexandra felt sorry for the elf. She was just doing her job, and she remembered David's arguments, that the elves had to serve humans, selflessly. She wondered if Em missed Mr. Journey, who had been very kind to Charmbridge's elves... even if he had turned out to be a fugitive warlock and would-be murderer.

“I don't plan to be here again,” she replied, truthfully.

“Em is very afraid Miss cannot stay out of trouble.”

“I really do try.”

Em continued staring at her, and then issued a dry chuckle. “Follow Em.” She turned and beckoned.

Alexandra followed the house-elf to a set of stairs that had been just down the corridor, and suddenly she felt stupid for getting lost. It seemed so simple to get around, with Em guiding her.

“Why doesn't Miss let Em take the snake outside? Em promises to let it go free.”

Alexandra looked down at the elf, and then at the snake, wrapped around her forearm. She could feel its scales scraping against her skin, and she couldn't explain why she felt an attachment to the poor creature. A snake wasn't like a raven, or even a rat. They weren't smart, or affectionate, or cuddly.

"I feel responsible for it," Alexandra mumbled.

Em tilted her head, giving Alexandra another odd look. "Then," the elf sighed, "wait here." She disappeared with a pop.

Alexandra waited, a bit nervously, until Em reappeared, holding a large wire-mesh cage.

"Miss can keep her snake in here," Em said.

Alexandra took the cage, unlatched the gate at one end, and thrust her arm inside, and then gently unwound the snake from around her wrist, until it had detached itself and fell in a tumble of coils to the floor of the cage. "Where did you find this?" she asked.

"Students leave lots of things behind," Em replied, looking amused.

"Thanks, Em!" Alexandra wrapped her arms around the elf and squeezed her gently. Em made a wheezing sound.

"Stay out of the basements, Miss," the old elf warned.

"I will." Alexandra smiled at Em, picked up the cage, and walked upstairs.

Alexandra woke up the next morning to Anna shrieking.

"What is that?" Anna cried out, pointing at the cage Alexandra had set on her desk before crawling into bed.

Alexandra sat up and rubbed her eyes. "It's a snake," she yawned.

Anna stared at her, as if considering which retort would be most appropriate, and finally settled on asking, in a very tight voice, "Where did it come from?"

Alexandra reluctantly slid her legs out from under the covers and stood up, to walk over and check on the snake. It was still sitting peaceably in the cage, flicking its tongue in and out. Then she turned to look at her roommate.

"Don't worry, I'm pretty sure it's not poisonous."

"Pretty sure?" Anna sputtered.

"Anna." Alexandra put her hands on her friend's shoulders, and spoke in a very serious tone. "You were right to be worried about me. But I'm fine now. I'm not going to be sneaking out at night anymore. I was being stupid. I'm really sorry." And as Anna's mouth fell open, Alexandra went on. "I have to take care of the snake. I... It's just my responsibility, now."

Anna looked at the snake, and back at Alexandra. "But you already have a familiar." Charlie cawed loudly in agreement.

Alexandra released Anna and walked over to reach into Charlie's cage. The raven pecked rather viciously at the back of her hand.

"Ow!" Alexandra yelped, withdrawing her hand. She rubbed it and glared at Charlie. "Of course you're my familiar! Nothing is going to replace you. Are you such a birdbrain that you're jealous of a stupid snake?"

Charlie squawked angrily.

"I'm not asking you to be friends or anything." Alexandra turned away from Charlie's cage, and faced Anna again.

Anna looked at her and sighed. "You're going to need to put something in the cage, like sand or leaves, and water. And you'll have to make sure it doesn't get too cold. And what are you going to

feed it? And you'd better make sure it's in its cage when Jingwei is here, because owls eat snakes."

Alexandra nodded.

"We slept late. We'd better get dressed and get downstairs if we want any breakfast," Anna said.

Alexandra nodded again.

"You make me crazy sometimes."

Alexandra nodded, and smiled.

"Jerk."

Alexandra gave Anna a hug. "C'mon. Let's go eat."

When they reached the cafeteria, they found the Pritchards eating with David again, while Darla and Angelique sat halfway down the table, with Lydia Ragland and Janet Jackson. Darla was yawning and looked ready to put her head down on the table and go to sleep. She jerked upright when she saw Alexandra, and the two girls stared at each other for a long moment, long enough to draw the attention of those around them. Then Alexandra broke gazes and walked over to sit down next to Constance.

Anna followed, and nervously sat down on the other side of her. David glowered at Alexandra, and the Pritchards looked down at their trays, and then picked them up.

"Wait," Alexandra pleaded. "Please."

The twins paused, as they were rising from the table, and slowly sat back down, still keeping their eyes averted.

Alexandra took a deep breath, and said, "You were right. About everything."

Constance and Forbearance finally looked up at her, their blue eyes showing surprise and concern.

“I was getting involved in things I shouldn't have been,” Alexandra mumbled. It was hard getting the words out – it felt as if her throat wanted to close around them – but the more words that came out, the easier it became. “I didn't mean any harm, I was just curious. I thought I could learn things without doing anything bad. I don't want to be Dark. I don't want anyone to think I'm Dark. But I was being stupid, and I didn't want to listen to you because I thought I knew better. I... I was wrong. And I'm done with all that stuff now. I swear.”

She waited – for a curse to strike her, though she didn't think she'd revealed any secrets by what she'd said – but more importantly, for her friends to react.

David frowned, while Constance and Forbearance looked at each other. They seemed to be weighing her words. Anna was wide-eyed, then she smiled slowly at Alexandra.

“Alexandra Quick, you're a trial and a pain,” declared Constance.

“A troublesome, high-headed mule,” agreed Forbearance.

Alexandra looked down, and grimaced. “Please don't sing that song about Troublesome again.”

The Ozarkers studied her a moment, and then, to her surprise and embarrassment, Constance reached out and took her hand.

“We had faith you'd come 'round,” Constance told her.

“You are powerful stubborn, Alexandra Quick,” said Forbearance.

“Vexing as nettles in your drawers,” said Constance.

Forbearance smiled. “But you usually do right in the end.”

“Don't you never make us worry like that 'gain,” Constance scolded.

David barked laughter, causing everyone to stare at him.

"Are you kidding?" he guffawed. "You really think Alexandra's gonna stop getting in trouble?" He shook his head. "Your friends are always gonna worry about you, Alex."

Alexandra stared at him, then smiled. He looked back at her. "What?"

She grinned. Anna took Alexandra's arm and smiled at David too.

"You're crazy, you know that?" he grumbled. "All of you. I don't know why I hang out with girls, sometimes."

"Can't imagine," Forbearance drawled.

"But we'll put up with you anyhow, I reckon," said Constance.

Alexandra noticed other members of the Mors Mortis Society giving her looks throughout the day. Some looked puzzled, others suspicious, others smug. Darla seemed to be avoiding her altogether.

She went to the library that evening, and after consulting a few books on reptiles, concluded that the snake she'd rescued was, in fact, a *Storeria dekayi*, or common brown snake. She was pleased to learn that it would be perfectly happy on a diet of earthworms and snails, though she realized those might be a little harder to come by in the winter months, when brown snakes normally went into hibernation. She knew that a few other students had snakes as familiars, and after asking around, managed to scrounge up a water dish, gathered some branches and soil from outside, and learned a simple Warming Charm from a book on Familiar Care that should keep the snake's cage warm enough, even when their rooms weren't kept as heated as was necessary for cold-blooded pets. She had no idea how to determine the sex of a snake, so she arbitrarily decided it was a boy. She named it Nigel.

She was caught by surprise when Stuart and Torvald cornered her in the hallway as she was leaving the library. Half-expecting them to hex her, she reached for her wand, but Torvald whispered, "We just

wanted you to know that we quit too," while Stuart looked around furtively.

Alexandra's fingers unclenched from her wand. "You did?" she stammered.

The two boys nodded. "We thought the Mors Mortis Society would be cool," Stuart whispered. "We wanted to learn some new jinxes we could throw at people, maybe stuff we could scare teachers with."

"Dark wizards have to be wicked at hexem," Torvald said.

"You joined a Dark Arts club so you'd be better at hexem?" Alexandra sputtered, then lowered her voice when the boys winced.

"Well, not just for that, but yeah." Torvald coughed.

"Anyway, you were right," Stuart continued. "We didn't join to learn Unforgivable Curses. We don't want to torture anyone."

"Or kill things," Torvald added. "Either this stuff is driving Darla Dearborn insane, or she was already nuts."

"I think she's just being stupid." Alexandra frowned. Like me, she thought.

"Maybe." Torvald looked dubious. "But some of those kids have squirming eels in their heads."

"Yeah." Stuart nodded. "You should probably watch your back. I don't think John liked the way you quit."

"I'll keep that in mind," Alexandra replied. "Thanks."

She was grateful. The warning she brushed off – she wasn't afraid of John. But she felt a little better about Stuart and Torvald. She'd always sort of liked them, even though they were both jerks more often than not. It made her happy to know they drew the line somewhere.

She worried about Darla, though, and Tomo. Were they really so far gone that they didn't think there was anything wrong with Unforgivable Curses? And what about Maximilian? She remembered seeing the snake writhing in agony on the floor of that room, and the unpleasant image of Anna lying on the ground, twitching and screaming, filled her with dread.

Do it, and I'll make you pay, she thought darkly, when she saw Tomo the next morning at breakfast. She gave her such an ominous scowl that the younger girl almost spilled her breakfast tray on the floor.

Maximilian didn't seem unhappy at all. In fact, he actually smiled at her at Monday morning formation, and his badgering of the new wands was noticeably reduced. Alexandra fumed, but decided not to antagonize him. Anna was relieved, and indeed, for the rest of the week, JROC exercises and drills seemed to go much easier for both girls.

Fine, Alexandra thought, glowering at Maximilian every morning and afternoon. You won. She'd endure his smug smile, if it meant he'd stop picking on Anna.

As the month of November wore on, the weather turned colder, and it became harder for Alexandra to find worms and snails for Nigel. Her searching took her further from the academy building.

Leaves blanketed Charmbridge's lawns, and multitudes of crows once again began nesting in the trees surrounding the academy, as they did every winter. In the wizarding world, some regarded ravens and crows as harbingers of doom, or spies for the Dark Convention, and a lot of kids didn't like walking near the woods.

The crows didn't deter Alexandra, of course, not even after she'd seen them turned into a murderous feathered horde last year by Mr. Journey.

She was foraging around the edges of the forest, late one afternoon, accompanied by Anna. Both girls were still in uniform, though there had been no JROC drill that day. Constance and Forbearance had declined to join them; they denied it, but Alexandra knew they feared

the crows, too. Anna kept looking at the trees, and the black swarms of corvids moving in the branches.

"You're not letting Old Colonial superstitions get to you, are you?" Alexandra asked.

Anna looked at her and frowned. "You saw what they can do," she said quietly.

Alexandra shook her head. "If wizards leave them alone, they're just birds." She knelt and pointed her wand at the ground, snapping an incantation like a command: "Defodio!" The ground exploded in front of her, spraying both girls with a shower of dirt, and leaving a hole almost big enough to sit in.

Anna spat, and brushed dirt off her uniform. "I don't think that spell is intended for digging for worms."

Alexandra grimaced, shook dirt out of her hair, and looked ruefully down at her own soiled uniform. Then, with a sigh, she leaned over and began rooting around in the excavated earth, gathering up worms and putting them in a small container. "It's getting colder, so I have to dig deeper to find any earthworms. I'm not sure how I'll keep Nigel fed through the winter."

"It's a shame he's not big enough to eat jarveys," Anna commented.

Alexandra snickered, and stood up. "I could always get a bigger snake."

"That's okay." Anna shuddered. She had given up on talking Alexandra into just turning Nigel loose in the woods, but she still wasn't thrilled about sharing their room with a snake. "You could just talk to Mrs. Verde. I'm sure she has worms in the greenhouse."

Alexandra stopped short, and then grinned at her friend and clapped her on the shoulder. "You're right! That's brilliant, Anna!"

Anna smiled and shook her head. "How come you never say that when I tell you not to do something?"

They had almost reached Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall when they heard a familiar voice barking, "Quick! Chu!"

The two girls groaned, and turned around. Mage-Corporal King and Mage-Corporal Nguyen were coming down the hallway towards them, looking appalled.

"What in Merlin's name have you done to your uniforms?" demanded Maximilian.

"You look like you've been rolling in the dirt!" exclaimed Martin.

"I haven't seen you two looking this hexed since your first week in the JROC." Maximilian shook his head.

Alexandra and Anna both stood at attention, cheeks burning. Other kids were watching, and Alexandra could hear some of them snickering.

"We were just going back to our rooms to change," Anna mumbled.

"Well, you do that, and report for a uniform inspection tomorrow morning, before exercises," said Maximilian.

Anna gasped. "Before exercises? We'll have to get up at –"

"It was my fault, Corporal King," Alexandra grated, through clenched teeth. "I cast a Defodio spell that sprayed dirt on both of us."

Martin snorted. "Merlin's balls you did! Where did you learn a Gouging Spell?"

Alexandra sneered. "There's this place called a library. It has books." She fell silent when Martin looked ready to take it out on both of them for her insolence. If not for Anna, she wouldn't have cared.

Maximilian was looking at her thoughtfully, and then he reached out and snatched the little metal box of earthworms out of her front pocket.

“Hey!” Alexandra protested, forgetting for a moment that she was standing at attention and he was a superior officer. Instead of yelling at her, though, Maximilian just smirked, and opened the box. Martin looked over his shoulder, and both boys' faces screwed up in puzzlement and disgust.

“You were digging for worms?” Maximilian asked, with an odd expression on his face. Alexandra's face burned more as she heard snickers from the audience that was beginning to gather in the hallway. “Can't your raven find its own meals?”

“They aren't for my raven. They're for my snake. You remember my snake, don't you?” She gave him a hard stare. Anna and Martin were puzzled, as Maximilian just looked back at her blankly.

“A raven and a snake,” he repeated. “You do like to play at being Dark, don't you, Quick?”

Alexandra was too furious even to respond, as more kids laughed behind her back.

“Uniform inspection,” he snapped. “Five a.m., tomorrow. Both of you.”

He stared at her, as if daring her to talk back. Glaring, she saluted, and so, reluctantly, did Anna. Maximilian and Martin returned their salutes and went back the way they'd come.

“Merlin, he's cute!” Alexandra heard a sophomore saying to her friends, followed by a chorus of giggles, as she and Anna hurried away. Alexandra shook her head, disgusted.

Back in their room, Anna peeled off her gray and blue jacket and flung it against the wall so hard that Charlie jumped and squawked.

“I hate him! I wish someone would put Max and Martin both in a really big hole and bury them! I can't wait until this semester is over! I'm going to burn this horrible, awful uniform!” As Anna raged, for once Alexandra was the calm one. She nodded, letting her roommate blow off steam, while she changed quietly out of her own uniform and hung

it carefully so she could apply a Cleaning Charm, and then took out her box of worms and dumped a few into Nigel's cage.

"Why, why does he hate us so much?" Anna cried.

"Dunno," Alexandra replied.

Their inspection the next morning, before dawn, was surprisingly quick. Maximilian and Martin barely looked at the two girls before sending them back to their rooms.

"Hurry up and change into your togs," Maximilian ordered, referring to their exercise clothing. Alexandra glared at him, and decided she was going to ask him later why he was being such a bully again, after she'd quit the Mors Mortis Society.

Back in their room, she noticed that Charlie was agitated, sitting on Nigel's cage instead of snoozing in the larger bird cage that she usually left open for the raven. Nigel was sliding nervously beneath a pile of leaves.

"What's your problem, Charlie?" Alexandra scolded. "Leave Nigel alone!"

"Alexandra!" squawked the raven.

"You're really being a jerk, Charlie." Grabbing the bird, she forced her familiar back into the bird cage, and this time latched the door.

"Alexandra!" squawked Charlie, angrily now.

"If you're going to harass Nigel, you can stay in your cage until you learn to behave," she said, and she and Anna left for their morning exercises.

She felt guilty at Charlie's sullen beady-eyed stare when they returned, so after she and Anna showered and they changed back into uniform before breakfast, she unlatched the bird's cage again. "Just stop being jealous, okay?" she pleaded. "You know you're my

favorite familiar. Nigel is just a snake. He's not smart or interesting like you."

Charlie made a show of ignoring her while grooming feathers, so Alexandra sighed and went to breakfast.

In the cafeteria, Alexandra was in line for orange juice (something that only Muggle-born kids seemed to like), when she almost bumped into Tomo Matsuzaka. The little Japanese girl stared up at her, pale and trembling.

Alexandra frowned at her, and Tomo whispered, "You'd better watch your familiars!"

"What?" Alexandra exclaimed, but the other girl spun around and hurried away as fast as she could. Alexandra almost chased her down then and there, but the Vice Dean was standing only a few feet away. Instead, she grabbed Anna and dragged her back to their room, over Anna's protests. David and the Pritchards gaped at them in astonishment as they left the cafeteria without eating their breakfasts.

"What's going on?" Anna demanded, when they reached their room. Alexandra burst in and ran to Charlie's cage. "Are you all right, Charlie?" she asked breathlessly.

The raven looked at her quizzically, and offered a subdued caw, confused but not quite ready to forgive her. She reached in and ignored the bird's half-hearted peck as she took her familiar out and stroked the raven's feathers, then turned to look at Nigel's cage. The snake still appeared to be quite happy, after its meal of earthworms the previous night.

Alexandra let Charlie go, and gasped, "Jingwei! We have to check on Jingwei!"

Anna's eyes widened, and they rushed to the aviary, but they found Anna's familiar comfortably sleeping on a high perch where the other largest owls resided. Jingwei hooted irritably at being disturbed, along with her neighbors.

Climbing back down the stairs from the top of the aviary, Alexandra told Anna about Tomo's whispered threat.

“That –” Anna hissed something in Chinese that Alexandra was sure wasn't nice. “She wouldn't dare hurt our familiars!”

Alexandra knew that attacking someone's familiar was a very serious offense, almost as bad as stealing a wand. Students at Charmbridge might hex each other, or use potions and curses, but going after familiars just wasn't done. Not even Larry Albo would stoop that low, she thought.

But who knew what the Mors Mortis Society had Tomo doing? Alexandra couldn't say anything about that to Anna, though. So she told her, “We'll be extra careful, and keep an eye on Tomo.”

Throughout the day, they went back to their room to make sure no one had snuck in. They cast Locking Charms on their doors, even the bathroom door, though normally they didn't worry about keeping Darla or Angelique out. But Charlie and Nigel remained undisturbed, and likewise, Jingwei continued to open one sleepy eye and glare at them each time they visited her in the aviary.

It was after dinner when a knock came on the locked bathroom door, just after Alexandra and Anna had returned from the cafeteria. They opened it, to find Angelique standing there. She looked upset.

“I don't suppose y'all have seen Honey?” she asked. Darla was standing behind her, looking worried.

“Why would we have seen Honey?” Alexandra asked.

“She's missing.” Angelique wrung her hands. “I thought maybe she got out of her cage and found her way into your room somehow.”

“If Honey were in our room, I think we'd know it.” Alexandra frowned at Darla, feeling a growing sense of unease. Angelique's roommate returned her gaze with a frown of her own.

"I don't know how she could have gotten out of her cage," Angelique said, "or how she could have gotten out of our room."

"Good question." Alexandra nodded, still looking at Darla. "Maybe we should go look for her. If she's loose anywhere nearby, I'm sure it won't take long to find a jarvey."

So Alexandra and Anna joined Angelique and Darla in the hallway. They walked up and down Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall, and Angelique even began knocking on doors, asking the other girls if they had found Honey.

While Anna was looking in the stairwell at the end of the hallway, Alexandra grabbed Darla's arm.

"What is the Mors Mortis Society up to?" she asked.

Darla stared at her. "You know I'm not going to tell you anything!" she sneered, tossing her head. "You quit."

"Did you leave your door unlocked?" Alexandra demanded.

The other girl frowned. "We usually do. There aren't many thieves at Charmbridge..."

"Tomo Matsuzaka threatened to do something to our familiars."

Darla paused. "You think Tomo kidnapped Honey? Why would she do that?"

"I was hoping you might know."

Darla gave her a haughty look. "If it did have anything to do with the Mors Mortis Society," she whispered, "I wouldn't tell you about it, but she'd be crazy to take my roommate's familiar!"

"Maybe she is crazy," Alexandra muttered, remembering what Torvald had said about Darla. "But it seems awfully coincidental, Honey disappearing after she threatens our familiars."

"I really doubt Tomo had anything to do with it," Darla snorted. "She was probably just trying to scare you."

Alexandra narrowed her eyes. "Is there a meeting tonight?"

Darla's eyes widened, for just a moment, and then she shook Alexandra's hand off.

Anna rejoined them, shaking her head. Angelique shuffled back to join them, looking even more distraught.

"No one has seen her," she sniffed.

"Maybe she found her way outside," Darla suggested. "Jarveys are better off in the wild, you know. And we'd certainly be better off if Honey were in the wild."

Angelique stared at her roommate. "She's never lived in the wild! She's always had someone to take care of her! She can't survive on her own!"

She probably won't survive at all if someone else finds her first, Alexandra thought to herself. Honey's mouth was not exactly a survival trait among humans.

For once, though, she managed to hold her tongue. She'd never thought of Honey as anything but an obnoxious pest, and before today would have rejoiced at the jarvey's disappearance. But now she thought about Nigel. No one understood why she had bothered to rescue a snake. She didn't really understand it herself. And she thought about what she would do if Charlie went missing. She watched uncomfortably as Angelique fought back tears, and realized that the other girl loved her obnoxious familiar.

"We'll find Honey," Alexandra promised, putting a hand on Angelique's shoulder. "If she doesn't turn up, we'll ask Miss Marmsley to put an announcement on all the bulletin boards tomorrow." Angelique sniffled and nodded, and then turned away, to go downstairs and continue her search.

By lights out, Honey had not appeared. Alexandra and Anna paid one more visit to Jingwei, who was now awake and preparing to take wing for the night. Anna hugged her owl, who hooted cheerfully before flapping off in search of dinner.

"Do you really think Tomo took Honey?" Anna asked, back in their room, as they got ready for bed. "We should tell a teacher."

"We've got no proof. I doubt she's keeping Honey in her room. She'll lie and say she doesn't know anything about Angelique's familiar."

"So we just... let her get away with it?"

"I don't know what else we can do." Alexandra shrugged, trying to sound resigned.

Anna looked at her suspiciously, then turned off the lights. "Well, good night."

"Good night, Anna."

Alexandra napped for an hour or so, and then, very quietly, slid her covers back and got out of bed.

"Lights." The lamps in their room flared, and Anna got up, looking at Alexandra accusingly. "I knew it! You said you were done with the Mors Mortis Society! You're up to something, aren't you? And it has something to do with Honey and Tomo!"

Alexandra sighed. "You're too smart, Anna."

Anna folded her arms and glared at her, unmollified.

"I am done with the Mors Mortis Society, I swear." Alexandra put her hands on Anna's shoulders. "But I'm going to rescue Honey. You know I wouldn't do nothing if it were Charlie or Jingwei. Or even Nigel," she added, looking at her snake.

"We wouldn't do nothing if it were Charlie or Jingwei... or Nigel," Anna declared. "I'm coming with you."

Alexandra opened her mouth, and Anna said angrily, "You always do this, Alex! You just decide to do things and run off and don't tell anyone!"

"You can't come with me, Anna."

"Why, because it could be dangerous?" Anna's voice was rising, and Alexandra looked in the direction of Darla and Angelique's room. "Shh!" she pleaded.

"Are you going to Stun me, or Petrify me?" Anna whispered.

"Of course not!" Alexandra whispered back, appalled.

"Then I'm coming with you. Where are we going?"

Alexandra closed her eyes, and sighed. "I'm not sure yet." And at Anna's baffled look, Alexandra said, "Just wait." She walked over to the door to the bathroom, and leaned against it, listening, while Anna stared at her, confused.

A few minutes later, she heard movement in Darla and Angelique's room, and the sound of a door being stealthily opened.

"Come on," Alexandra whispered, and she cautiously cracked open the door to their own room, peeking outside just in time to see Darla sneaking down the hall.

"Darla is in the Mors Mortis Society?" Anna gasped in her ear. "And you didn't tell me?"

Alexandra gave her an apologetic look, then put a finger over her lips. They waited until Darla had reached the warlock hanging over the entrance to the hall. Anna looked puzzled, as Darla did something with her wand. She hurried on, and then Alexandra and Anna exited their room and crept after her.

"But —" Anna whispered, looking nervously at the arch they were about to pass under.

Alexandra held a finger to her lips again, and then, when they reached the same spot Darla had, she held up her wand and spoke the incantation as quietly as possible: "Pictogel."

"Later," she murmured, as Anna stared upward at the frozen hall monitor as they passed below his portrait.

Without a coin, Alexandra couldn't know where the meeting was being held, but she'd seen which stairwell Darla had entered, and they dashed after her. When they reached the basement, they looked right and left, and saw no sign of the other girl. Alexandra was sure they were heading towards the lower basement levels again.

Anna was amazed. She hadn't even realized there were more underground levels below the main basement. She grabbed Alexandra's arm, and whispered, "Where are we going?"

"Down," Alexandra murmured. When they got down to the next floor, the stairs they were on ended, so they had to proceed down a darkened corridor, listening for sounds of anyone else moving nearby. After their third turn into another unused basement corridor, lined with what looked like old wooden lockers of some sort, Alexandra had a bad feeling that they were lost again.

"Alex," Anna squeaked, looking nervous.

A door ahead of them opened. They both shrank back into the recess of a door frame behind them, as a tiny figure emerged from yet another stairwell and turned away from where Alexandra and Anna were hiding.

"Tomo!" Alexandra hissed, as she recognized the Majokai witch. The sixth grader spun around, and Alexandra lunged out of the shadows.

Tomo screamed and turned to run. She got a dozen paces before Alexandra tackled her and dragged her to the ground. Anna caught up as Alexandra was sitting on the smaller girl and grabbing her by the front of her robes.

"Where's Honey?" Alexandra demanded, while Anna looked around nervously.

"Who's Honey?" cried Tomo.

"Angelique's jarvey!" Alexandra snarled, and shook the other girl violently, yanking on her collar hard enough to make her face start turning red.

"I didn't do anything to her!" Tomo stammered.

"You threatened our familiars! When you couldn't get into our room, you took Angelique's instead!" Alexandra let go of Tomo with one hand, and drew her wand, pointing it at the hapless girl's face.

"No!" Tomo shrieked. "Please, don't!" Her face was full of terror. "I didn't! I didn't do anything! I got into your room but I couldn't! I don't want to hurt anyone! I couldn't even hurt that stupid snake! I don't want to be part of any of this! Please, let me go, just let me go! Don't hurt me!"

Alexandra lowered her wand, and stared at the frantic, terrified sixth grader, who was now sobbing uncontrollably.

"I didn't do anything!" Tomo wailed. "I hate all of this Dark Arts stuff! I didn't come to Charmbridge to learn how to torture and kill things! I just want to go home!"

Tomo's cries echoed up and down the dark corridor, but no one else seemed to hear. As Alexandra slowly released her grip, Tomo covered her face with her hands and curled into a little ball.

Alexandra and Anna looked at each other, and back down at the Japanese witch. Tomo's shoulders shook as she continued crying.

Alexandra stood up slowly. "Calm down," she murmured. She reached for the other girl's hand, to help her up, but Tomo whimpered and shrank away from her.

Tomo, Alexandra realized, was terrified. Utterly terrified. Of her.

"We're not going to hurt you," she mumbled. The hand holding her wand hung limply at her side. She tucked it back into her pocket, and glanced at Anna, who was frowning uncomfortably.

Tomo just continued to lie on the ground sobbing. Alexandra knelt next to her.

"Why did you threaten our familiars?" she asked quietly.

"I wasn't th-threatening you, I was w-w-warning you!" Tomo stammered.

Alexandra and Anna looked at each other again.

"What happened to Honey?" Alexandra asked.

"I don't know!" Tomo insisted. "B-but..." She bit her lip.

Alexandra scowled at her, and leaned over her threateningly. Tomo cringed, and blurted out, "Darla, Darla was going to get your familiar after I couldn't, but she's no good at Unlocking Charms and John and Sue were really mad..." She gasped, and put her hands over her mouth. Alexandra could see the whites of her eyes, as her expression became even more terrified and her eyes darted side to side.

Alexandra felt sick, for more than one reason. She lowered her voice.

"If you hate being in the Mors Mortis Society, why don't you just quit?" she asked.

Tomo stared at her, trembling.

"You joined, you stayed even after seeing what kind of sick things they do," Alexandra said. Anna was very quiet, behind her.

Tomo removed her shaking hands from her mouth.

"I needed protection," she gulped. "They said they'd protect me."

“Protection?” Alexandra tilted her head. “Protection from who?”

Tomo continued staring at her. The sick feeling in Alexandra's gut began to be replaced by guilt.

“Me?” She shook her head. “Why – what –?”

“She tried to kill me!” Tomo squealed, pointing at Anna accusingly. “And you threatened to turn me inside out!”

“You threatened to turn her inside out?” Anna looked at Alexandra incredulously.

“It's not like I was actually going to do it,” Alexandra muttered.

“I wasn't trying to kill you,” Anna said to Tomo. “But you kept threatening me, and then you used that nasty Nail-Pulling Jinx on me!”

“You hexed me first!” Tomo accused.

“You did?” Alexandra stared at her roommate.

“Just a little one. After she called me dirty names!”

“You put 'Jap monkey' on my textbook!” Tomo exclaimed indignantly. “I can read Chinese characters, you know!”

“Anna!” Alexandra was shocked.

“You started it!” Anna snapped.

“I did not! You acted like I was polluting your precious school the moment I arrived!”

“I didn't say anything. You started the name-calling.”

“I just said, 'What's your problem?’”

“You said, 'What's your problem, chink!’” Anna hissed.

The two girls continued flinging accusations back and forth until Alexandra shouted, "Stop it! Shut up, both of you!" Anna and Tomo both jumped, and closed their mouths. Alexandra looked from one to the other. "You two are so stupid!"

They winced. Alexandra held out a hand to Tomo again. "Come on." She spoke as gently as she could manage. "We're not going to hurt you. I swear."

Tomo looked at her mistrustfully, and then, very slowly, extended a shaking hand. Alexandra closed her fingers around the other girl's, and pulled her to her feet. Tomo sniffled, and wiped her nose against her sleeve, not looking at either of them.

"Give me your coin," Alexandra demanded.

Tomo looked up at her, wide-eyed. "What?"

"Your coin. Your MMS coin." Alexandra held her hand out. "Give it to me. Then don't go back. You can just walk away." She spoke more softly. "You don't need protection from me or Anna. You don't have anything to fear from us anymore. You two are going to stop fighting. You don't have to be friends. Just leave each other alone and keep your mouths shut. You can do that, can't you?" She glared at both of them. Anna flinched, and Tomo swallowed hard. They both nodded.

"On my witch's honor," Alexandra swore, meeting Tomo's gaze. "I'm not your enemy. I'm not going to come after you or do anything to you."

Tomo stared at her, and then slowly held out her Mors Mortis Society coin. Alexandra took it from her, and Tomo sighed, as if a large weight had been taken off her shoulders.

"Now, can I trust you two to go back to your rooms together without hexing each other?"

Anna and Tomo looked at each other, and back at Alexandra. Anna started to protest: "I'm not –"

“Yes, you are,” Alexandra interrupted her firmly. “You need to keep an eye on Tomo.” She looked at the younger girl. “In case a curse takes effect on her, you’ll need to take her to the infirmary.” Tomo gulped, and Anna looked startled.

“Look out for each other, and get out of here. Wait for me back in our room. Don’t argue!” she snapped, as Anna opened her mouth again.

Cowed, the other two girls fell silent. Finally, Anna asked meekly, eyes downcast, “What are you going to do?”

Alexandra gritted her teeth. “I’m going to rescue Honey.” And she left Anna and Tomo in the corridor behind her. She followed the directions that Tomo’s coin gave her, as its glowing arrows guided a tiny point of light deeper into the basements.

Crucio

Although every turn in the bare stone corridors deep below Charmbridge Academy looked familiar, the warren of dark tunnels was confusing enough that Alexandra was sure she wouldn't have been able to find her way without the MMS coin. Her wand was the only source of light now, but she advanced determinedly through the darkness, too outraged to feel properly nervous.

She didn't want to believe what Tomo had told her, but the younger girl was obviously too terrified to lie. That Darla had actually tried to get at Charlie was bad enough, but stealing her own roommate's familiar seemed to be a sign of something even darker and more ominous. Alexandra had never thought of Darla as a malicious person, not even after her pathetic attempt at a Killing Curse, but now she was starting to wonder whether the other girl had been possessed or something.

When the coin showed her she was almost at the meeting place – Alexandra was certain now that it was that cavernous room with the Indian paintings – she saw a cloaked figure ahead of her, leaning against the stone wall. The figure started as Alexandra approached, and asked, “Who's that? Quick?” in a startled voice.

“Stupefy!” Alexandra shouted, not even slowing down. A red beam shot out of her wand and caught the surprised lookout full in the chest. He collapsed against the wall behind him and slid to the ground, legs splayed out at an awkward angle. She stepped over him and kept going.

She heard gasps and cries of alarm as she stormed through the doorway, and found herself facing over a dozen Mors Mortis Society members. John and Sue were in the center of the room. Alexandra felt sick fury when she saw that John was holding a knife, and Honey was lying on the ground at his feet.

“You psycho!” she shouted, pointing her wand at him. “Expelliarmus!” The knife spun away with a flash of light.

John stared at her. Sue was standing next to him, blinking in astonishment. "How did you – you shouldn't be here, Alexandra!"

"None of you should be here!" Alexandra snapped. She turned her head, to look directly at Darla, who was the most startled of all. "I can't believe you!" she exclaimed. "You actually took Angelique's familiar to sacrifice in some sick black magic ceremony?"

Darla opened her mouth, and stammered, "I – I didn't want to –"

"What, they made you?" Alexandra demanded, gesturing at John and Sue. "And I suppose they made you try to steal Charlie instead?" Her eyes blazed, and Darla swallowed nervously.

"You are so dead!" Alexandra hissed. She walked right up to John, and looked down at the jarvey. Honey was strangely stiff and motionless. "Did you kill her?" she asked, horrified.

"Petrified," John replied. His eyes glittered.

"What were you going to do with her?" She looked at the knife on the ground.

John's other hand lashed out and caught her by the throat, and she was so startled she almost dropped her wand.

John squeezed, and growled, "Turn around, walk out of here, and never come back, or –"

Memories from last year were flashing through Alexandra's mind, when Ben Journey had seized her by the throat while she was bound and helpless, just before his final attempt to kill her. It wasn't something she thought about often, though she had relived it more than once in her dreams. She felt a flash of rage, and John cried out and let go of her, thrown back by an invisible force. He shook his hand as if it had been burned, while she gagged and staggered away from him, clutching her neck with one hand and pointing her wand at him with the other.

"You're all crazy," she gasped. She looked around. The other Mors Mortis Society members were staring at her, all looking shadowy and sinister in the dim light shed by their wands. There wasn't even a fire lit in the room. She caught a glimpse of Maximilian's face, standing to the rear, and then she turned back to John and Sue.

"This is disgusting!" She looked down at Honey. "Sacrificing pets? This is what scary Dark wizards do? You're pathetic, you bunch of losers!" She reached down to pick up the petrified jarvey. "You're really, really sick! You're all going to be expelled, like you deserve!"

Alexandra loathed tattletales as much as anyone, and didn't much like the idea of being a snitch, but she knew someone had to do something. The Mors Mortis Society couldn't be allowed to keep doing things like this.

"You're forgetting about the magical contract you signed," Sue warned quietly. "Tell anyone, and you'll be struck dead."

"Hah!" Alexandra snorted. "Like I believe that! You're probably too lame to be able to put a real curse on it! Anyway, I don't care."

It was rash, spoken in the heat of the moment. She was so furious about Darla, and their desire to harm Charlie, she wasn't even really thinking about consequences. It only occurred to her belatedly that this might not have been the wisest thing to say under the circumstances, as all the other faces around her turned hostile and ugly. Suddenly the path to the exit was blocked by several older students.

She raised her wand, but John was faster: "Expelliarmus!" Her wand flew from her hand.

John pointed his own wand at her. "I don't think you're going to tell anyone, Quick."

She stared at his wand, and wondered whether her rashness might just have been the sort of fatal mistake that Anna kept warning her about.

Until now, she'd regarded the Mors Mortis Society as a bunch of particularly anti-social troublemakers. The possibility of being cursed or beaten up had crossed her mind, but she'd assumed they wouldn't dare go too far. Mrs. Murphy would turn a blind eye to minor jinxes and hexes while patching students up, but serious injuries would be reported to the Dean.

There was a line she assumed even her worst enemies, like Larry Albo and Billy Boggleston, wouldn't cross, though. As she looked around at the sullen, malicious expressions on the faces of the Dark Arts students, and then at John Manuelito, whose eyes were gleaming and malevolent, it finally dawned on her that she might be in real, serious danger.

She squared her shoulders, and sneered. "What, are you going to kill me? Do you really think you'll get away with that?" While the confidence she'd had a moment ago was slipping away, she tried to look unfazed. "Are you really that crazy, that you think you can kill someone and cover it up, and no one will talk?"

Privately, she was starting to think that some of them just might be that crazy. She could almost hear Anna saying, "Why don't you ever listen to me?"

"We don't have to kill you," said John. "You'll promise to keep your mouth shut. In fact, you'll swear an Unbreakable Vow on it."

She snorted. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah." He smiled cruelly. "Crucio!"

Alexandra staggered backwards, stayed on her feet for a second, and then fell to her knees. She felt her muscles twitching and her skin crawling as pain flared along all her nerve endings. She let out a silent, breathless gasp, and then John raised his wand and kicked her in the chest, knocking her flat on her back. Some of the other kids jumped. She lay on the ground, staring up at him.

"Here's an opportunity to see what the Cruciatus Curse can really do," he announced, his eyes shining eagerly. "Since you were asking

us before what it's good for, Quick... it's good for breaking mouthy little girls. Crucio!”

This time the pain was worse. It was like white hot wires running under her skin, all over her body. Alexandra bit down on her tongue to keep from screaming, and arched her back, then tried to roll over. The pain ran deeper, searing into all her limbs, and her skull itself felt like it was on fire. She moaned and shook violently.

At last it stopped, and she heard John say, “Why don't you beg?” He leaned over her. “Or would you like us to bring your little Chinese friend down here, too?”

Her response was defiant and profane, as she rolled over and punched him in the face. He jerked back, rubbed his nose, and pointed his wand again. “Crucio!”

It was even worse the third time. Alexandra cried out once, then flipped over onto her belly, and then rolled back over, as if there were some way to escape it, and the torment just went on and on. She remembered Nigel twitching and writhing around, and she felt like her poor snake, thrashing and twisting in agony.

I'll never beg, she thought, but hot tears were blinding her and it was becoming hard to think about anything but the pain, and the thought of John doing this to Anna made her want to throw up as much as the pain did –

“That's enough!” someone yelled, and the pain stopped. Blinking, Alexandra lifted her head, to see that Maximilian had stepped into the center of the circle. His hand had grabbed John's wrist and yanked his wand away.

John gaped in surprise at the other boy. He was older, and a little taller than Maximilian, but Maximilian was broader at the shoulders and much more muscular. Physically, the Stormcrow was easily a match for him.

“This isn't necessary,” Maximilian said.

John's mouth curled into a sneer. "Getting soft-hearted?" he asked quietly.

"I don't think you can break her. All you can do is drive her out of her mind, or kill her." And as Alexandra shuddered, Maximilian told John, "I'll take care of her."

There was a long pause. Alexandra was dragging herself to her hands and knees, but she was all out of heroic acts of defiance – it felt like it would take a heroic effort just to stand. She was aware of tears running down her face, and couldn't do anything about it.

"You'd better," John said, and then Maximilian was kneeling next to her.

"Walk with me," he whispered, putting an arm around her waist. "Don't make me Stun you. You won't like being dragged by your ankles."

She glared at him, noticed that he was holding two wands in his other hand – his and hers – and wished she could Crucio him. But his expression was devoid of emotion, reflecting none of the hatred and fury she was feeling.

She allowed him to help her to her feet, trying to hide how weak she felt. She looked around, and saw everyone staring at her. There were a couple who looked as if they weren't happy about what had just happened, but most just looked hostile. Her eyes met Darla's, and she saw a mixture of nervousness, resentment, and something dark and fearful and unpleasant on the other girl's face, and then Darla looked away.

Finally, her eyes settled on Honey, still lying petrified on the floor, and as Maximilian began pushing her towards the door, she looked up at him, and croaked, "Angelique's... jarvey."

He blinked at her. "You've got to be kidding."

"Please," she whispered, eyes pleading, though it killed her.

Maximilian stared at her for a moment, then shook his head. He turned and bent over to grab the jarvey, while Alexandra swayed unsteadily on her feet.

“How are we supposed to demonstrate the curse?” Sue protested.

“Use your own damn familiar!” Maximilian snapped, and led Alexandra out of the room.

“You'd better make sure she doesn't talk,” she heard John warn ominously behind them.

Maximilian looked down at the unconscious body of Tony Masterson in surprise as they stepped over him. He and Alexandra walked in silence until they reached the first set of stairs going up. Alexandra was feeling a little better with each passing second, but her legs were still shaking, so she didn't try to push away the older boy's arm around her waist. When they reached the stairs, he let go, and then she felt his hand against the small of her back, as if to support her, and she finally turned on him in a fury.

“Give me my wand back!” she hissed.

He looked down at her impassively. “Even if you hadn't just been Crucioed, do you think you could take it from me?”

“You pig!” she sputtered, along with a few stronger words. “You lousy, rotten, stinking —”

“Not here,” he said calmly, still with that expressionless face. “Upstairs, and you can yell at me and call me all the names you like. You want to carry something? Here.” He thrust the petrified jarvey into her hands.

She was trembling as they climbed the stairs. The sub-basement below the main basement, where she and Anna had confronted Tomo, was still dark and unlit. Maximilian held up his wand to light the way for both of them. He led her down a long corridor, past a pair of bathrooms, and a metal door opposite them with an old stenciled sign hanging on it saying, 'Warning: No Students Allowed!'

"I don't think any of the others will come this way," he said, when they reached the end of the corridor. Alexandra heard the sound of running water on the other side of the wall behind him, and then the sound diminished to a gurgle, and then nothing.

He let go of her, then, and while she lunged away from him, he calmly said, "Muffliato." She stumbled a few steps, and then turned to face him. The adrenaline pumping through her was starting to ebb, and the realization of what had just happened was beginning to sink in. She felt the urge to yell and scream at him drain away.

"What are you going to do to me?" she asked. "To make sure I don't talk?"

"Kill you, cut you up into little pieces, and feed you to the Thestrals," Maximilian replied.

Alexandra almost took a step back, and then saw the sardonic smile on his face, illuminated by the glow of his wand.

She called him another bad word. He just smirked. Then his expression became serious, and he walked forward until he was standing over her again. She glowered at him, until he handed her her wand.

"Aren't you afraid I'll hex you?" she snapped, grabbing it.

"Do you have any self-control at all?" His tone was very patronizing. "You are brave and headstrong as a blue bull, and about as smart. Why don't you think, for once, instead of just blustering and threatening?"

She hadn't been expecting a lecture like that, so she just stared at him, while he knelt in front of her, and looked at the hand clutching her wand.

"Put your wand away." Though he said it in a normal tone of voice, it was unmistakably a command. Alexandra started to bristle, and then, slowly, she tucked it into her pocket.

"Let me see your hand," he ordered, in the same tone of voice. He held out his hand, and Alexandra, now too disoriented and confused to argue, held out hers. His fingers closed around her wrist, in a surprisingly gentle grip, and he instructed, "Make a fist."

She did. Then he said, "Now open and close your fingers."

She obeyed, and he nodded, then held his wand up to her face. She flinched away from the bright light. "What –?"

"Just hold still, and open your eyes wide." His voice had actually become softer and gentler. Not sure what to make of this, and not sure why she was suddenly doing what he told her, she held still, and tried to force her eyes open. It was a lot like being at the optometrist's office, with a light shining in her eyes, and just like when the optometrist held up a penlight and moved it around, her eyes followed Maximilian's wand as he did the same thing. But she doubted Maximilian had studied Muggle optometry, so when he lowered his wand, she frowned at him.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Long-term damage from the Cruciatus Curse includes impaired dexterity in the hands, and eyes that have trouble reacting to light and movement," he replied, sounding as if he were reciting something from a textbook. "You seem to be tracking fine, though. I didn't think you'd been subjected to it long enough to do any permanent damage, but I wanted to be sure."

She stared at him, not sure what questions to ask. Everything had become so confusing now.

"I can't believe you did that," he said, shaking his head. "Just charged in there like an avenging Power. Did it never occur to you that these fools are dangerous? After everything you've seen, did you think you could just barge in, tell them off, and walk away? A twelve-year-old girl against a Dark coven? And you did this to save a jarvey?" He looked down at the large, stiff rodent in Alexandra's hand, with an expression akin to disgust.

"Why do you care?" she asked. "You're one of them." Suddenly his soft tone and his gentle hold on her wrist seemed creepy and threatening, and she pulled away from him. He let go of her wrist, and she backed away, until she bumped into the wall behind her, but he remained where he was, on one knee. With his wand held out between them, she couldn't see much more than a shadowy outline and his half-lit face. She thought about drawing her wand again, but Maximilian still wasn't moving. Logic told her that if he meant her harm, he could have done something already, but common sense told her she should be worried about his intentions.

"What do you want? Do you think being nice to me all of a sudden will make me promise not to say anything? You've been bullying me and Anna all semester, and secretly practicing Dark Arts while you pretend to be a good JROC officer! Do your friends from Blacksburg know what you do at midnight? Does Ms. Shirtliffe?"

"There you go again," Maximilian replied calmly. "If I were a Dark wizard, how smart would it be to threaten me like that?"

"If you were a Dark wizard, would you believe me if I just acted like a scared little girl and pretended to do whatever you say?" she retorted.

She couldn't see his expression, but after a moment, the Stormcrow chuckled. "No, meekness doesn't suit you," he admitted.

"Stop acting like you know me!" she snapped. The anger was returning. "What do you want? You know I'm not going to just pretend like none of this ever happened, so you can drop the nice guy act. Either let me go, or do whatever you're going to do to me." She found herself curiously unafraid.

He stood up and whispered something that dimmed the light at the end of his wand, though it didn't extinguish it completely. "I'm not going to do anything to you," he sighed. "But you should be aware, that blood oath you signed wasn't entirely a bluff. You're right about them not being able to write a curse into it that will strike you dead. A Mortal Contract is far beyond the abilities of these posers. But if you

do go rat out the Mors Mortis Society to an adult, you probably will be afflicted with something nasty.”

She wrinkled her nose. “And you think that will stop me?”

In the near-darkness, she could see his head moving; shaking side to side, she thought. “Would you believe me if I told you that I'm actually on a mission?”

She blinked. “A mission?” She remembered Mr. Thiel, the undercover Wizard Justice Department agent who had pretended to be a janitor last year. “Do you work for the WJD? You're not really a BMI student?”

He shook his head again. “No, I don't work for the WJD, and I am a BMI student. But I came here hoping that the Mors Mortis Society would invite me to join them.”

“So you could learn their secrets? You wanted to study Dark Arts?”

“The Dark Arts can be useful, but those aren't the secrets I'm after.”

“What, then? Stop being so mysterious!” she snapped. “You want me to believe you're on some secret mission and you're not Dark, but you aren't really telling me anything! Why should I believe you, and why would you trust me?”

He cleared his throat. “Why do you think the Mors Mortis Society invited you to join them, Alexandra?”

She frowned, though she knew he couldn't really see her face. “I think you know why.”

“Yes. Everyone knows. You're Abraham Thorn's daughter. Which, if all the rumors about him are true, means you could become a very powerful witch. And some of these blaggards were probably hoping that being friends with you would be worthwhile, because you could connect them to your father.”

"I've never even met him," she said. "And I'm not Dark!" She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "You're starting to sound an awful lot like a WJD agent. Are you trying to trick me into admitting I know more than I do?"

There was a long pause, and then Maximilian chuckled. "No. But I know how you feel."

This only made her more confused and angry. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He stepped forward, and held up his wand so it shined light onto both of their faces. "Have you been interviewed by Diana Grimm, yet? Or do they have someone else assigned to you? Maybe that creepy bald warlock, Raspire?"

She stared at him. He looked down at her, his face serious and his tone earnest.

"The Mors Mortis Society invited me for the same reason they invited you. Because Abraham Thorn is my father."

Her mouth opened, but she couldn't find words. Having endured one shock after another tonight, she could only listen wide-eyed as Maximilian said, "I'm your brother, Alexandra."

Maximilian's Mission

"This will take a while," Maximilian said. "We have a lot to talk about."

"You think?" Alexandra muttered.

They were both sitting down now, side by side on the cold stone floor, with their backs against the wall. Periodically, they felt water rumbling through the pipes on the other side.

"I mean, it will take more time than we have tonight. We could sit here talking until dawn."

Alexandra nodded slowly. "If I don't show up back at my room soon, Anna will probably panic and go tell the hall monitor." She turned her head and looked at her alleged half-brother, though she really couldn't see anything more than a slightly darker shape in the darkness surrounding them, as Maximilian had extinguished his wand. "How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"I guess you don't," the older boy answered, after a pause. "I don't have any way to prove it to you offhand. I could get a copy of my birth record, but that will take some time. If we were at Blacksburg, you could look at the Registrar's Scroll." He paused again. "You could just ask Martin or Beatrice, assuming you'd believe them."

"Do all your friends know?" she asked. "Does everyone at your school?"

"No," he replied. "Just Martin and Bea – we've been friends since sixth grade. The Dean and the Commandant at Blacksburg know, of course, but they agreed to keep it quiet and allow me to be enrolled under my mother's name. I assume Dean Grimm knows, too. Colonel Shirliffe might, but I haven't brought it up, and she hasn't said anything."

"Then how would the Mors Mortis Society know?" asked Alexandra.

"You've heard of the Dark Convention?"

Alexandra nodded. Then, realizing that Maximilian couldn't see her nodding in the darkness, she answered, "Yes. Are they real?"

"They're real. Although most of what you hear about them is bull – er, nonsense. But they really do use Dark Arts gatherings like the Mors Mortis Society to recruit. Most of the kids in the MMS are just fools, like you said. But a few of them have the... qualities that the Dark Convention is looking for."

"So the Dark Convention knows about you... and me... and that's why we were invited," she said slowly, thinking it over.

There was a brief silence, and then Maximilian must have realized his nod was equally invisible, and replied, "Right. Someone – John, I'm pretty sure, and maybe Sue too – is actually in contact with real Dark wizards."

"So John knows you're my brother. That's why he thinks you can 'take care of me.'"

"Yes."

She thought about that, then asked, "What's this 'mission' you're on?"

"That's the part that will take a while."

"Who's your mother? Have you met our fa – Abraham Thorn? If you're not really interested in becoming a Dark wizard, why have you been participating in the Mors Mortis Society? Why have you been such a jerk to me? Why didn't you tell me in the first place? How could you just stand there while John was t–torturing me..." Alexandra suddenly had a million questions, but her voice almost broke on the last one, and she frowned, furious at the unexpected emotion that memory brought forth. She shuddered, too, involuntarily.

"We can talk about all of this," he said gently. "We will talk about all of this, I promise. I want to explain everything. I know I've made mistakes. This whole time, I've never been quite sure what to do about you, and so I've probably cobbled up a lot. I don't blame you for

being angry, and I don't expect you to just trust me and believe everything I say right away. But will you at least give me a chance?"

My brother, she thought, still having a hard time wrapping her mind around that concept.

"What about the Mors Mortis Society?" she asked. "What were they going to do with Honey?" The jarvey was still lying stiffly in her lap. If she didn't know otherwise, she would have thought the creature was quite dead.

"Put a curse on Angelique, through her familiar," Maximilian replied. "It's a nasty trick that can be used to do terrible things to someone, but they just wanted to punish her a little bit. They haven't worked their way up to doing serious harm yet. But they were going to do it to you, with your raven."

"Those creeps!" Alexandra cursed. "If they touch Charlie I'll kill them!" And then another thought occurred to her. "That's why you dragged me and Anna out early this morning, so Tomo could sneak into our room and abduct Nigel?" Alexandra was becoming furious again.

"Nigel?"

"My snake! The snake you and your scummy friends were going to torture and kill –"

"They're not my friends, Alexandra!" he corrected her sharply. He felt the heavy silence between them, and added, more apologetically, "Yes, I told Tomo to go after your snake instead of your raven. Look, I don't enjoy harming animals either. But it is just a snake. I knew you wouldn't have a connection with it like you do with your other familiar."

She took several deep breaths, trying to calm down. "So they wanted to punish me," she said at last. "And Angelique. What about Stuart and Torvald, and Tomo, and all the other kids who have quit?"

"They can't go after everyone. It would be too obvious. But you definitely need to watch your back. What happened to Tomo? She didn't show up tonight."

Alexandra quickly explained how she and Anna had confronted Tomo, and Maximilian made a hissing sound through his teeth. "Yeah, she could be in trouble too. Give me her coin. I'll do what I can to keep them off her. I'll tell them something to persuade them it's better to leave her alone. I didn't think she really had the heart for this stuff; I wasn't sure why she was still participating."

Alexandra looked down, glad that it was too dark for Maximilian to see her face. Then she looked up, and asked quietly, "What about Darla?"

"Darla..." Maximilian sighed. "I don't know what she thinks she's doing. She's a silly little girl who wants to impress older boys."

"Even kill her best friend's pet, and watch her get cursed?"

"She probably knows she's in over her head now, and she's scared, but she's also being really stupid."

Alexandra was silent, and Maximilian said, "We really should get back to our dorms."

"So, you want me to trust you, and keep quiet, and not tell anyone about all these terrible things going on? And when someone else gets cursed, or worse..."

"I'll warn you if anything bad is going to happen, and if I have to, I'll go to Dean Grimm myself," he promised. "But yes, I want you to trust me."

"That's a lot of trust for someone who's been nothing but a butt-head, and this could all be a lie, and you could be working for the Dark Convention yourself, for all I know."

"That's true," Maximilian replied somberly.

She was silent again, for several seconds, before she put her hand into her pocket. Then, reaching out in the darkness, she found Maximilian's hand, turned it over, and put Tomo's MMS coin in it.

"No one else gets hurt," she stated. "No curses, no familiars getting abducted. If anything happens to anyone and I think the Mors Mortis Society is behind it, I'll go straight to Ms. Grimm and take my chances."

"All right," Maximilian said.

"You owe me a really big explanation, and I mean soon. Really soon."

"Yes," he agreed.

"And stop being so mean in JROC."

"You and Chu are still new wands. I can't stop treating you accordingly."

"You can do it without being an obnoxious bully, can't you?"

He laughed a little. "You have no idea how new wands get treated at BMI. We call the start of sixth grade 'a semester in hell,' and it doesn't get much better until seventh or eighth grade. But I'll try to ease up."

She frowned, but decided that would have to do. She began to rise unsteadily to her feet. Maximilian was already on his feet, and grasped her arm to help her up. She wasn't sure how she felt about that, but she didn't resist him, and when she was standing, he murmured, "I hated watching you get Crucioed. I almost stopped it the first time, and I should have stopped it the second time." He paused, and it sounded as if he were having trouble speaking when he continued. "I wasn't sure what to do, how much you could take before I'd have to intervene, even if it meant blowing my mission. So that's probably my biggest blunder so far, and I don't blame you if you hate me for it. I am sorry, Alexandra. I won't let that happen again, I promise. And if you want to Crucio me for it, I deserve it. I'll willingly let you do it until you feel satisfied."

She stared at him, even though she couldn't see his face. It was the seriousness with which he said it that convinced her in that moment that he was telling the truth, that he really was her brother. And at the same time, she was appalled, rather than comforted, by his words.

"You didn't Crucio me," she said quietly. "If anyone deserves it, it's John. But I don't think I'd do it to him either, even if I knew that spell."

She wasn't sure that was true. She knew there was a part of her that would like very, very much to see John Manuelito writhing on the floor, screaming in pain. Then she remembered the look of terror on Tomo's face, and wondered if that part of herself was what the Boggart Tomo had seen looked like.

On the ground floor, she and Maximilian looked at each other, blinking in the relatively bright light cast by lamps near the main entrance. She thought she could see, now, the resemblance to Abraham Thorn, at least from pictures she had found of her father. Maximilian had the same handsome profile and square jaw, and the same dark, penetrating eyes. Her own pale skin and green eyes were completely unlike her father's and her brother's; they had only their straight black hair in common.

Questions came bubbling to her lips, but she knew this wasn't the time or place to ask them.

"Soon," Maximilian murmured, as if reading her mind. He waved his wand, and conjured a handkerchief. He murmured, "Aguamenti," and dampened it with a jet of water. She was puzzled by this, until he touched it to her cheek and began wiping away the tear tracks left behind after her Cruciatus experience. Annoyed and embarrassed, she snatched the cloth away from him, and rubbed furiously at her eyes herself.

She felt Honey start to squirm in her other hand, and realized the Body-Bind Charm on the jarvey was wearing off.

"Would you please not tell Chu all this?" Maximilian requested. "Knowing about the Society won't do her any good, and I'd rather you didn't tell her about us." When she frowned at him, he told her, "Not

many people know who my father is, and I'd like to keep it that way. I think you can understand why."

She kept frowning. "I'll think about it."

He didn't look happy, but nodded slightly.

"What am I supposed to tell Angelique?" she asked.

"Mudblood!" growled Honey sluggishly.

"That you were too late to save her jarvey?" Maximilian suggested.

She glared at him, and he shrugged. "Angelique knew Darla was in the Mors Mortis Society. I'd say return her familiar, and let Darla deal with the consequences. Maybe that will be enough to make her quit."

"Dunk the witch!" snapped Honey. Alexandra now had to hold onto the jarvey with both hands.

"I hope so," she muttered. Then she looked up at him again. "Hey, all this stuff you've been telling me – aren't you worried about the curse in that secrecy contract?"

"Oh, I already had it removed." Maximilian smiled at her. "Martin's been studying curse-breaking for a couple of years now. He's not a professional, of course, but neither was whoever enchanted that contract."

She stared at him as he walked off towards another wing of the academy, where the eleventh grade boys slept, then hurried back to her own dorm. Honey continued wriggling in her hands, and even tried to bite her.

"I can't believe I just risked my life to save you," Alexandra said to the jarvey.

"Stinky-hands!"

"Shut up, Honey."

She had been hoping the Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall monitor would be asleep again, but when she reached the entrance to the seventh grade girls' dorms and peeked around the corner, she saw that the old warlock was awake for once.

"Pictogel!" she intoned sharply, pointing her wand at the portrait, and then she sprinted down the hall towards her room, hissing, "You probably woke him up!" at the jarvey.

"Filthy Mudblood!" Honey's voice was getting louder.

"How would you like to be introduced to a really big snake?"

She shifted her grip to hold the jarvey by the scruff of the neck, dangling her from one hand, while she opened the door to her room with the other.

Anna was pacing inside, and rushed to the door as soon as Alexandra opened it. Charlie cawed loudly.

"Dwarf!" sneered Honey, her feet pawing the air.

Anna gasped. "You found her!"

"Yeah, and I can't wait to get rid of her." Alexandra hurried across their room to the bathroom, walked through it, and pounded on the door to Darla and Angelique's room before opening it.

Darla wasn't back yet, but Angelique was lying on her stomach in bed, with the covers thrown off. Her face was buried in her pillow, but she looked up, startled, when Alexandra walked into her room.

"Honey!" she exclaimed.

"Lazy bed-head! Is sleeping all you ever do?" Honey snapped.

Angelique leaped out of bed and took the squirming creature out of Alexandra's hands, and snuggled her against her chest.

“Feed me!” Honey demanded, but Alexandra noticed the jarvey immediately stopped thrashing about and became docile in her mistress's arms.

Angelique looked up at her, with an awkward, grateful expression.

“How did you find her?” she asked softly.

Just then, Darla opened the door from the hallway, and stood there, frozen in the doorway. She and Alexandra stared at one another, both their faces unreadable. Before either of them could say anything, though, Honey began screaming such a litany of curses that even Angelique looked shocked.

“Ask Darla,” Alexandra said, not taking her eyes off of Angelique's roommate. She backed into the bathroom, forcing Anna to move aside, and closed the door. From the next room, they heard Honey continuing to screech noisily, while Angelique pleaded with her to be quiet, until finally the jarvey fell abruptly silent – muffled, Alexandra assumed, by a Silencing Charm.

She turned to look at her wide-eyed roommate.

“I can't believe I saved that thing,” she grimaced. “You have to wonder where she learns all that.”

Anna kept staring at her.

“Is Tomo all right?” Alexandra asked. “You didn't hex each other, did you?”

Anna shook her head.

“You made sure she got back to her room all right? Without threatening each other or getting in another fight?”

Anna nodded, frowning.

“Good. Well, it's really late, isn't it? We'd better go to bed –”

“Alex!” Anna practically shouted. “Are you kidding me?”

Alexandra sighed. “I know. I owe you an explanation. But it's a long story, and I really am tired, Anna. Can it wait until tomorrow?”

Anna's brow wrinkled up with concern. “Are you all right?” she asked.

Alexandra really didn't feel all right, and she had no idea what she looked like. She was almost afraid to look in the mirror. Her thoughts were still whirling, and her nerves still tingled with the memory of the Cruciatus Curse. There was so much she had to think about, and a lot she didn't want to think about. And she knew that if she told Anna half of it, her friend would absolutely freak out.

So she nodded. “I'm fine,” she assured her. “I'm just really, really tired.”

Anna looked unconvinced, but nodded. “Okay, Alex,” she agreed softly. “Let's go to bed.”

Alexandra checked on Nigel, and took a few moments to pet Charlie, who had emerged from the cage hanging by the window and was sitting on her bedpost.

“I'll never let anyone hurt you!” she whispered fervently.

“Alexandra,” cooed the raven, pecking affectionately at her hand.

She finally tumbled into bed, but long after she and Anna had extinguished the lights, she lay on her back staring at the ceiling, in the darkness, thinking about Maximilian and Abraham Thorn. When she fell asleep, she dreamt that she was slithering on her belly, like a snake, unable to do anything but flop around and hiss in pain, while John Manuelito stood over her, screaming, “Crucio!”

Alexandra almost dreaded getting up the next day. Staying in bed would have been so much easier. But Anna's worried “Alex?” as she emerged from the bathroom and found Alexandra still under her covers forced a sigh, and emergence into the cold light of morning.

She ran a hand through her unkempt black hair, trying to ignore Anna's worried expression, and walked into the bathroom just as Darla tried to enter from the other side.

"It's my turn," said Darla.

Alexandra took two steps towards her, and Darla backed rapidly away. Alexandra pushed the opposite door shut, with a slam that almost drowned out Darla's cry of indignation.

She hadn't heard much conversation going on in the next room, like she usually did in the morning. Even Honey seemed to be silent (or was still Silenced). Now she wondered what Darla could possibly have said to Angelique, and whether Angelique would go tell on her herself.

She felt a little better after a shower. She emerged into the bedroom, and began putting on her uniform, glancing at Anna, who was already in hers.

"Your wand pin is too close to your collar," she said. "And your belt is crooked."

Anna frowned, and began adjusting her pin. "Fine, Alex, if you're not going to tell me anything –"

Alexandra sighed, and reached for the pin that Anna was about to stick into her uniform upside down. Anna's hands fell away while Alexandra adjusted it for her.

"Did Tomo tell you why I was worried about a curse?" Alexandra asked.

Anna swallowed. "Not exactly," she said quietly. "But she was scared. She was afraid to tell me anything. So I guessed... I guessed the Mors Mortis Society made you both swear some kind of oath of secrecy. Is that right?"

Alexandra nodded slowly. "I want to check on her this morning." She finally finished fixing Anna's pin, and then looked her over,

straightening the other witch's uniform. "So you understand why I can't tell you everything?"

"You have to go to the Dean," Anna said firmly. "Most magical oaths can be removed, you know, unless it's an Unbreakable Vow."

"Maybe I will." And when Anna looked thoroughly unsatisfied with that answer, Alexandra pleaded, "Will you trust me, Anna?"

Anna sighed. "You usually get in the most trouble when you think you know what you're doing."

"Do I look like I'm about to run off and do something?"

"No," Anna replied quietly. "You look really serious. That's what worries me."

"You always worry, Anna." Alexandra smiled, to take the sting out of her words, and patted her friend on the shoulder. "Come on. Let's go to breakfast."

Downstairs, Alexandra scanned the cafeteria. She saw Maximilian sitting with the other Stormcrows, as usual, at the end of a table they reserved for themselves. He looked at her and gave her a small nod, then turned back to Beatrice, who was sitting on the other side of him from Martin, and continued whatever conversation he was having with her.

Sue Fox was sitting with a group of eleventh grade girls, one of whom had also been at the Mors Mortis Society meeting last night. Neither of them looked at Alexandra, but a couple of other kids she recognized were glowering at her, including Tony Masterson. Alexandra had rarely seen John Manuelito in the cafeteria, and he wasn't here now.

She tried to look as if she didn't notice the covert glares being cast in her direction. Anna took her tray to join David and Constance and Forbearance at their usual table. Alexandra was about to join them, but paused when she saw Tomo enter the cafeteria, accompanied by a couple of other sixth grade girls. She strolled over to them.

Tomo's friends immediately glared at her. "Why can't you just leave her alone?" said one, a brown-haired girl who was nearly as tall as Alexandra. Her voice quavered, though, and she gulped when Alexandra looked at her. Their fear made Alexandra feel both formidable and small.

"It's okay," Tomo murmured. There was nervousness in her eyes, too, but she swallowed and said, "I'll join you in a minute."

The other two girls looked at her dubiously, looked back at Alexandra, and then shuffled over to their table, with several suspicious glances over their shoulders. Tomo stood where she was, not looking up.

"I just wanted to check on you," Alexandra said quietly. "Nothing else happened last night?"

Tomo shook her head. "I was worried..." She looked around and dropped her voice to a whisper. "About the curse. But nothing's happened."

Alexandra nodded. She had been thinking about that, and had decided she should read more about magical oaths. "I don't think that curse is as powerful as they say it is," she whispered back. "But that doesn't mean they can't do something to you."

Tomo nodded, eyes downcast.

"You can tell your friends I will leave you alone. And I'll make sure Anna does, too. But, be careful of the others. If anything happens, or anyone else threatens you, tell me," Alexandra whispered.

With that, she walked over to join her friends, and sat down next to Anna.

Anna, David, and the Pritchards were all looking at her. She wondered what Anna had told them. She felt tired already.

"Ready for that Magical Theory test?" David asked.

Alexandra groaned. She hadn't studied at all.

When Angelique arrived, Darla was still nowhere to be seen. Angelique filled her tray with breakfast, then shuffled towards the table where Alexandra and the others were sitting, and hesitated.

Alexandra gestured for her to come join them. When she sat down, looking as nervous and downcast as Tomo had, Constance asked, "Where's Darla?"

"I don't know," Angelique muttered. "She was still in the shower when I left."

Constance and Forbearance raised their eyebrows. Angelique and Darla always came to breakfast together.

Alexandra wanted to ask her what Darla had told her, but didn't think it was a good idea to talk about it in front of everyone else.

In the classes they had together that day, Angelique sat with her and Anna, and Darla sat at a table by herself, and avoided looking at any of them. Alexandra also noticed, for the first time, that they weren't the only ones avoiding Darla – no one wanted to sit with her. Darla adopted a haughty demeanor, and spread her books and pencils and scrolls out on her desk as if it were her private domain.

Alexandra found herself staring blankly at her scroll during her Magical Theory test. Her mind kept going back to the previous night, and then to her confrontation with the Boggart on Halloween, and that black void in the room beneath Charmbridge Academy. Then she looked up and found Miss Hart frowning at her. Alexandra shook her head, trying to banish these unwanted thoughts.

'6. Give an example of Ptolemy's First Principle of Magic, and describe one spell you have learned this year and how this principle applies to it,' she read, and not only could she not remember Ptolemy's First Principle of Magic, but she couldn't remember answering questions one through five.

"That wasn't too bad," David said afterwards.

"Hm," Alexandra grunted.

Darla did come to the cafeteria for lunch, but she sat with Wayne Reeves and Tony Masterson at another table. Alexandra frowned, and saw that Angelique wore a troubled expression when she spotted her roommate sitting with the two older boys from the Mors Mortis Society.

Alexandra sighed, and joined Anna and David to head for Wizard Social Studies. Angelique and Darla had Astronomy and Astrology after lunch; Alexandra would have to wait until after school to talk to Angelique.

In P.M.E. class, Ms. Shirtliffe had the JROC students flying broom drills again. Maximilian did seem to be less overbearing, but Alexandra was distracted and kept staring at him, then looking away. Shirtliffe made her repeat several simple maneuvers, and then reprimanded her when her response to the question, "What's wrong with you today, Quick?" was a shrug. That day, for the first time, Anna actually performed her drills better than Alexandra did.

"Quick!" barked Maximilian, when the JROC formation was dismissed after the final school bell rang. He strode over to her and Anna.

"Your flying today was miserable," he said, "and so was your attitude. I think you need another remedial training session."

Anna started to object. Alexandra shook her head at her. "It's fine, Anna. Go on." She glared at Maximilian, who looked ready to shout at her. He just scowled, until Anna, looking wary and concerned, slowly walked back inside.

"Whatever remedial training you have in mind, Corporal, it won't be on a broom," Colonel Shirtliffe declared, walking over with a concerned expression of her own.

"No, ma'am," Maximilian replied.

Shirtliffe looked at Alexandra. "Is everything all right, Quick?" she asked. "Do you need to talk about anything? Mage-Corporal King's remedial training can wait until another day."

Alexandra shook her head. "I'm fine, ma'am."

"All right." Shirtliffe sounded almost reluctant. She frowned at Maximilian. "I'd better not see any excessive 'training,' King, and don't keep her out too long. There will not be a repeat of the previous incident."

"No, ma'am," Maximilian repeated. They both waited until the uniformed teacher had marched out of earshot. There were still a few students out on the fields – younger kids playing Quidditch after school, and a few older ones tending to the few plants in the outdoor herbology gardens that hadn't died yet – but Alexandra and Maximilian were mostly alone, now.

"My flying was not miserable," she muttered sullenly.

"Actually, it was." Maximilian looked amused. "I've seen you fly much better."

"When I'm not flying into a tree, you mean?" she retorted. Maximilian looked down.

"You did that on purpose, didn't you?" she asked sharply.

"I didn't mean for you to hit it quite so hard," he admitted.

"I could have been killed!"

"Not likely. You are a witch. But it wasn't one of my better ideas." He sighed, and actually looked guilty as he met her disbelieving stare.

"Walk with me," he said, gesturing.

After a moment, she followed him, and they began walking past the gym and stables.

"I thought I might put you in the infirmary for a day or two, long enough to keep you from going to the meeting. And maybe even rattle you enough that you'd want to quit."

"Brilliant plan." Her tone was heavy with sarcasm.

"Look, I just admitted it wasn't. I didn't know how else to keep you away from those sorcerers. You've seen how dangerous they are now. Do you understand why I was trying to protect you?"

She looked sideways at him, frowning. "Why, because I'm your sister? We'd never even met before this year. Who made it your job to protect me? And how about telling me the truth from the beginning? For three months, you've been acting like my worst enemy, and you never mentioned we're related. I'm really sick of people knowing stuff about me and not telling me!"

Her words came out in a stream, with more anger and bitterness than she'd intended. But Maximilian just listened to her, and nodded.

"I heard about what happened to you last year," he said gravely. "With Benedict Journey. I'm glad that traitorous snake died, and not you."

"What do you know about it?" The two of them were walking side by side, and Alexandra felt that Maximilian was speaking to her as if she were an actual person for the first time, but it was only making her angrier. "Are you going to actually tell me anything or not?"

He sighed. "All right. Where do you want me to start?"

She thought a moment, then stared ahead, and said, "Our father."

"Right." He nodded, with a wry smile. "He married my mother about twenty years ago. At the time, he was at the height of his political career, and depending on who you ask, he needed to remarry so he'd look like a good family man, or my mother thought she was marrying a future Governor-General." His smile faded, and his words became more heated. "But that's dragon dung! He and my mother really did love and respect each other. I know they had political reasons for

getting married, but it wasn't just convenience. Either one of them could have chosen someone else rich and powerful.”

“Okay.” Alexandra was nonplussed at his tone and his angry expression. Were people always telling him that his parents had only married for political reasons? Then she did a double-take. “Wait... remarry?”

He hooked his thumbs through the broad red leather belt around his waist, and hunched his shoulders forward a little, looking uncomfortable as they rounded another corner of Charmbridge's exterior. “Well, yes. He's been married and divorced at least three times. My mother was his third wife. I think.”

Alexandra blinked at this. She'd read several biographies of Abraham Thorn last year, but they mostly talked about his political career and the events that led to his becoming the most notorious and wanted wizard in the Confederation.

“I've read books about him,” she said. “I don't remember anything about three wives.” Of course, it had been hundreds of pages, mind-numbing at times.

“Did you ever hear about what happened to Jerwig Findlewell?”

“No. He wrote one of those books, right? I think I read it.”

“The Darkness That Threatens Us All! Yes.” Maximilian smiled, without much humor. “You probably read the revised edition. Booksellers and librarians were quick to apply Editing Charms on that one. Findlewell wrote a little too much about Father's family. He's now in the Dunwoody Home for the Incurably Cursed. Reporters who've put the names of Father's ex-wives or children in the press have also had bad things happen to them.”

“Children? Other children?” Alexandra felt slightly dizzy at all the information spilling out of her half-brother.

Maximilian nodded. “You and I have four other sisters that I know of, besides Julia. I've met Lucilla and Drucilla, but not their younger

sister Valeria – they're Father's daughters by his second wife. And I've heard he had a daughter by his first wife.” He added bitterly: “All of us get interviewed by the Office of Special Inquisitions, at least a couple of times a year.”

“Julia?”

He smiled. “My other little sister. She's a couple of years older than you.”

Alexandra let 'little sister' pass, and asked, “So is he still married to your mother?”

Maximilian shook his head, mouth pressed into a firm line. “He became an opposition figure in the Wizards' Congress around the time I was born, and then he started associating with other wizards who were out of favor, and keeping questionable company. Then came his trip to Britain, shortly after Julia was born, and his alleged meeting with Lord Voldemort. Governor-General Hucksteen branded him a traitor. He and my mother had already separated by that point. He didn't oppose her petition to divorce, which was fortunate since he tried to kill Hucksteen a few months later.” He shrugged. “Mother says the divorce was necessary. We're still living under his shadow as it is.”

Alexandra's mind was whirling again. She had always been an only child. She was still struggling with the idea that she had a half-brother, and suddenly she had five half-sisters as well?

She thought about this, as they kept walking, and Maximilian remained silent, letting her mull over this new information.

Finally, she asked, “What's he like?” in a somber tone.

Now Maximilian was quiet, as they walked along. They rounded a corner and continued walking down the length of another wing of the academy. To their right was a large brick fire pit, where last year at about this time, Alexandra had nearly been barbecued by renegade Clockworks, following the orders of Ben Journey.

"I've only met him a few times, since I was little," he answered at last. "It's kind of hard to talk to your father when the Wizard Justice Department is always watching you so they can arrest him if he shows up. I think he keeps an eye on all of us, but the more involved he tries to become in our lives, the more scrutiny there would be on us from the WJD. So..." He shrugged. "Lucy and Dru told me it's the same for them. None of us know him well."

Alexandra's eyes were fixed on the ground. There was so much to think about, and as Maximilian had said the other night, they could talk for hours and still not exhaust all the questions she had. She was feeling curiosity, excitement, jealousy, and resentment – all these new siblings she'd never known about, whom she now had a very real desire to meet. But all of them had at least met their father, and had had the advantage of growing up in the wizarding world, and knowing about each other. And what was she? The youngest cast-off of a man who had left a trail of abandoned wives and children behind him?

"What about my mother?" she asked quietly. "She's not even a witch. She's never told me anything about him. Was she just some Muggle girl he... fooled around with, and left?"

Maximilian stopped walking, and turned to regard her seriously. She stopped also, but couldn't quite meet his eyes, and instead fixed her gaze on the silver button, stamped with the image of a crow, that held his short military cloak to the collar of his uniform, just below the tight muscles of his neck.

"I don't know, Alexandra." His voice was as quiet as hers. "From what I've heard about our father, he's always been something of a playboy. There are all sorts of rumors, and scandals from when he was younger." Alexandra frowned, wrinkling her nose, as Maximilian went on. "Not something I really wanted to ask my mother about, and the few times I've met him, it didn't really occur to me to ask him about other women."

She nodded slowly. She could see why asking their father about his love life would be awkward. She looked up at him, trying to read his expression, and divine the truth from his dark, steady gaze, but she

couldn't. Nothing he'd said was implausible, and she couldn't think of a reason for him to make any of this up, but she didn't know how she felt about any of it.

"How long have you known about me?" she asked.

"Rumors that Abraham Thorn had another daughter, going to Charmbridge Academy, went around last year," he said. "Then Diana Grimm mentioned you, when she interviewed me this summer."

Her brows knit together in an angry frown. "So was that your mission?" she demanded. Her voice began rising again. "Show up here, turn me into a good little JROC officer who will do what she's told? What, you thought telling me you're my brother would be too obvious, so instead you just decided to act like an arrogant jerk —"

Maximilian threw his head back and laughed, which did nothing to soothe her temper. "What are you laughing at?" she snapped.

He made himself look serious again, with an effort, and smiled at her. "That doesn't make any sense, you know," he pointed out. "You must realize that? How was treating you like any other new wand going to earn your trust? And I had no idea at the beginning of the school year that you'd wind up in the JROC. I would have preferred you hadn't, at least at first. Yes, Ms. Grimm gave me the same speech she always does, about letting her know if I hear from my father, and she did tell me to keep an eye on you, since he might be more likely to contact one or both of us, with the two of us here at Charmbridge. But I don't think they expect to get any useful information from any of his children. He's not stupid, you know. The last time I met him, he told me to go ahead and tell the WJD agents everything about our meetings. He knows they'll interrogate us, and he's smart enough not to tell us anything that will be useful to them."

Alexandra was still fuming, both at Maximilian's laughter, and at all the things he knew, all the experiences he had had, that she hadn't. "You should have told me," she said angrily. "You should have just told me from the beginning. Were you ever planning to tell me?"

“Eventually. I was hoping to get to know you first, but that obviously didn't work out too well.”

“Yeah, when you and all your friends are bunch of arrogant bullies and jerks and then you try to kill me, I can see how that made it hard to say, 'Oh, by the way, I don't really hate your guts, I'm actually your brother.'”

He shook his head, and gave her a wry smile again. “You are mouthy. And awfully sarcastic.”

His smile faded when he saw the baleful expression on her face, and he sighed and put a hand on her shoulder. “Look,” he said softly. “I messed up, I admit it. I'd rather you hated me than get dragged into this.”

She looked at his hand on her shoulder, and he let it slide off.

“What is 'this'?” she demanded. “You said you have a mission.” Her tone was skeptical now.

They had walked over halfway around the school. Maximilian looked around, as if worried that someone might be eavesdropping on them. There were no people on this side of the academy, though, only a trio of Clockwork golems, out on the lawn raking leaves. Further away, a black flurry of crows was descending on the treetops. Alexandra watched them wheel and spin about, cawing and shrieking, and wondered if they were the same crows Ben Journey had commanded to attack Ms. Grimm. She shook her head and looked at Maximilian again.

“I told you that the Mors Mortis Society has connections with the Dark Convention,” he said, in a much lower voice.

She nodded.

“Dean Grimm isn't stupid. She knows that there's a Dark Arts club meeting secretly in her school. So does the Wizard Justice Department.”

Alexandra frowned. "And they aren't doing anything about it?"

"They are. Dean Grimm just wants to get rid of them – catch the students who are practicing Dark Arts and expel them. But the WJD wants to find out what the Dark Convention's involvement is." The two of them continued walking along, now shuffling through leaves the Clockworks hadn't reached yet. They made a crackling sound underfoot. Alexandra had to resist to the impulse to run through them, gleefully kicking up a storm of autumn leaves, as she might have a year ago. But this was a serious conversation, and she wasn't in the mood, and besides, she didn't want Maximilian to think she was a little kid.

"So you are working for the WJD!" Alexandra exclaimed, and then lowered her voice when Maximilian winced.

"I wouldn't exactly call it working for them," he said defensively. "It's not as if I'm getting a salary."

"So what are you getting from them?" she demanded. "Seems awfully risky, sending a teenager undercover to infiltrate a secret society of Dark wizards."

"Yes, it is, which is why I didn't want you involved. And why I preferred letting you think I was a... big fat bully."

She shook her head. "Dean Grimm knows about this?"

"Not about me, no. I was told by the Office of Special Inquisitions that she refused to cooperate in planting a special agent at Charmbridge. Apparently, she and her sister aren't on speaking terms at the moment, and she doesn't think too highly of the WJD. So, they told me about the Mors Mortis Society instead."

"And you're supposed to infiltrate them?" she asked incredulously. "And the WJD let you, because you're Abraham Thorn's son and they figured the Dark Convention would be extra-interested in you? And then what? You rat out the Mors Mortis Society, help them arrest some Dark wizards? What's in it for you? All they want is to catch our

father, and they don't mind using us to do it! And you're willing to cooperate with them? Will you turn him in, too, if you get a chance?"

Her eyes were flashing angrily, and then she skidded to a halt as Maximilian rounded on her, his expression as angry as hers. For a moment, she saw cold fury in his eyes, and she was reminded of before, when he'd grabbed her and seemed on the verge of throttling her.

Now, however, he took a deep breath and slowly let it out, and then his dark, ominous scowl faded, to be replaced with a small smile.

"You sound awfully loyal to a man you've never even met," he said quietly.

She glowered at him, but her tone was less certain when she replied, "I'm not loyal to him. But I don't see why I should be loyal to the Confederation either. They didn't care about me or my mother all these years, and now they just want to use me."

He nodded. "That's right. Just like they want to use me, and Julia, and all of Father's other children. But if I help them here, I earn their trust and maybe have a chance of advancing my career after I graduate. There's a huge stigma in being one of Abraham Thorn's children, you know. Lucy and Dru are very talented Artificers, but no one will hire them. No one will marry them either, not from the circles they rightfully belong in. Valeria has gone overseas to get away from the Confederation. I know Julia is going to have the same problem. She's a beautiful, intelligent girl, and she's already shunned by boys who aren't worth a tenth of her." Maximilian's eyes blazed, and Alexandra was amazed at the sudden passion in his words. "She'll never get any decent marriage proposals while Governor-General Hucksteen is in power! Neither will you."

"What?" Alexandra sputtered. "Marriage proposals? Are you kidding?"

"Well, of course you're too young to be thinking about that now, but you will be —"

"I will not!" she spat. "And why would I care about any boys who are stupid enough to care about who my father is? You're risking your life and turning into a Dark wizard so your sisters can get married? That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard!"

"I'm not turning into a Dark wizard, and it's not just about my sisters getting married," he replied, in a much calmer tone of voice. "It's about undoing the damage our father has done to us."

"And the Governor-General," said Alexandra.

Maximilian smiled tightly. "Yes. Him, too."

"Are you crazy?"

His eyes glinted with amusement. Alexandra wasn't amused at all. Their grand tour around the exterior of the academy had almost brought them to the front entrance, where some older students and a few teachers were coming and going, on foot and on broom. "So do Martin and Beatrice know about this secret mission of yours?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Martin knows a little, but he doesn't ask questions. Bea wouldn't understand."

Alexandra snorted.

He stopped, and turned to face her. "So, do you believe me?" he asked seriously.

She squinted at him. "You'd have to be crazy to make a story like this up," she muttered.

"Then can I trust you?" he asked.

She blinked. "What?"

"I just told you all my secrets, Alexandra. You could blow my cover with the Society. Or you could spread it around school that I'm

Abraham Thorn's son. Or you could go to the Dean. She'd probably put an end to the Mors Mortis Society immediately."

"She should."

"But then I won't be able to prove myself to the Dark Convention, and I won't be able to prove myself to the WJD, and you and Julia will never get married."

"That's –" Alexandra started to sputter again, then noticed the amused glint back in his eye. "You are such a jerk!"

"But I am serious," he said, as his face turned serious, matching his words. "You could really bollix everything for me."

She considered that.

"What happens if the Mors Mortis Society tries to really hurt someone?" she asked.

"As I said, I'll go to the Dean myself if I have to."

She frowned. This still sounded like a stupid idea to her. Maximilian waited, while she mulled everything over.

"Would you really let me Crucio you?" she asked.

"Do you really want to?" he replied gravely.

She shook her head.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, studying her.

She shrugged. His steady gaze remained fixed on her, until she answered, "Fine," at last. She looked back at him. "So what now?"

"Now, we're done with remedial training for the day." He clapped her on the shoulder, hard enough to stagger her. "Don't you have homework?"

She glared at him.

"I do want to be your big brother, Alexandra," he said softly. "I know you've had a rough time because of Father, and growing up in the Muggle world. But here you are, and you're fierce, and brave, and wickedly talented, too! A real daughter of Thorn."

Alexandra's eyes were wide now. Once again, her brother's words caught her off-guard, and replaced indignation with shock and confusion. "You think I'm... talented?"

"That was some Stunning Spell you hit Darla and Tony with." He smiled. "And when you actually put effort into it, you're not half-bad when it comes to handling a wand and broom. Yes, you're clever and powerful... and thick-headed, temperamental, full of yourself –"

"I guess Abraham Thorn's children are like that," she said dryly.

His mouth twisted into a wry grin. "I'm sure he's proud of you."

She stared at him, unable to think of a response to that.

A gust of wind blew leaves up around them. Maximilian dispersed them with a wave of his wand, and Alexandra realized that she'd often seen him doing things with greater ease than most juniors.

"Teach me all the stuff you know," she said. "Magic, I mean. And I want to hear more, about our father, and your sister, and your mother, and all the times you've met Diana Grimm. I want to hear everything."

He nodded.

"And stop being such a jerk."

He smirked a little. "In uniform, you're still a new wand, Quick." When she continued glaring at him, he held his hands out in mock acquiescence, and shrugged. "Julia says I'm a blaggard, too. But she knows I'm just looking out for her."

"I don't need anyone to look out for me," Alexandra replied.

He stared down at her, and his face grew serious again. "That's what you think. Anyway, I'm going to whether you like it or not."

Annoyed, she snorted and shook her head, but as much as she wanted to tell him off, there was something about his earnest expression that stirred feelings in her for which she had no name. Maximilian was an arrogant, hot-tempered jerk and a condescending bully. But now she was seeing another side of him: tough, brave, skilled, determined, ambitious. And protective. She had never had a brother, and she still didn't know how she felt about having one suddenly appear in her life.

Wizard-Dueling

Alexandra wanted very much to tell Anna about Maximilian. She knew she could trust her friend not to tell anyone else. But this wasn't just her secret – it was also her brother's.

Maximilian did start treating them no more harshly than he did the other new wands in JROC, and increasingly, he hardly shouted at Alexandra at all. But she found herself not liking it when he caught her holding her wand incorrectly, or handling her broom with less precision than the other JROC mages, and so she put more effort into doing it right. And even Adelaide and Beatrice complimented her on her uniform.

In the week leading up to Thanksgiving, everything seemed peaceful, though members of the Mors Mortis Society still gave her dark looks in the hallways. Alexandra was less worried about herself than about other kids who might have offended John Manuelito or Sue Fox. She waited each morning for Tomo to come down to the cafeteria, and she even kept an eye on Stuart and Torvald, who often bore the marks of curses they inflicted on one another in their games of hexem.

Darla and Angelique began sitting together in the cafeteria again, much to Alexandra's amazement. She finally cornered Darla's roommate after Transfiguration class one day, and asked her, "Why haven't you turned Darla in?"

"We signed that contract! I don't want to be cursed," Angelique whispered. "And besides," she added, not meeting Alexandra's eyes, "she'd be expelled, for good."

"She should be."

"So why haven't you turned her in?" Angelique countered.

"It wasn't my familiar she almost killed. I can't believe you're still talking to her!"

Angelique frowned. "She was scared," she said quietly. "They – you know who I'm talking about – they were going to do things to her, or

to her familiar, if she didn't bring them someone else's. That doesn't make it right, and I'm still angry at her. But..." The other girl looked away, biting her lip.

"But what?" Alexandra demanded.

"She's my friend," Angelique whispered. "And I'm worried about her."

Alexandra stared at her, and found herself unable to come up with a rebuttal.

"I hope you're worried about Honey, too," she muttered, and walked away.

Alexandra thought that Angelique had reason to worry about Darla. Darla was spending less time with her classmates, and hardly spoke to Alexandra and her friends at all. Other than Angelique, Darla's peers now seemed to be almost entirely Mors Mortis Society members, and Alexandra saw her mostly hanging around with John Manuelito, Wayne Reeves, and Tony Masterson, laughing at their jokes as if they were a constant source of wicked amusement.

The company she kept, and her infamous attempt to cast a Killing Curse, had given Darla a reputation, and Alexandra was beginning to think she enjoyed it. Alexandra herself was still regarded with suspicion and even fear by many students (something she was beginning to take more notice of, after Maximilian's warning about how their father's reputation would affect them), and though she'd denied it to her friends, there were moments when she enjoyed the way she made other kids nervous. But after seeing the sheer terror she'd inspired in Tomo Matsuzaka, she enjoyed her "Dark" reputation much less. The fact that Darla now seemed to be embracing hers puzzled Alexandra.

Darla isn't my problem, she told herself. It wasn't as if they'd ever really been friends. And she resolved to stop worrying about Darla Dearborn.

"Quick," Maximilian called out on Wednesday afternoon, the day before Thanksgiving. The JROC students had just been dismissed by

Colonel Shirtliffe, and Alexandra and Anna had almost reached the exit from the gymnasium. Anna stiffened, but Alexandra turned, with a neutral expression. She hadn't really had a chance to speak to her brother since the previous week, outside of JROC drills. They didn't have any classes together, and seventh graders (other than Darla) didn't usually hang out with upperclassmen.

Maximilian spoke in a casual tone, unlike his usual bark. "If you're interested in applying some of that wandwork we've been practicing, a few of us are going to get together this afternoon for some dueling practice."

"Dueling practice?" Alexandra's eyes lit up.

"Strictly voluntary," he added, as Anna stared at Alexandra, and then at Maximilian.

"Yes!" Alexandra replied eagerly, and then noticed Anna's look. "Umm, I mean..."

"You can come too if you like, Chu," Maximilian said, sounding more like the contemptuous, condescending JROC officer they were used to.

"No, thanks," Anna muttered.

"No, thanks, sir, or no, thanks, corporal!" he snapped.

"Yes, sir. No, thank you, sir," Anna responded, through clenched teeth, and turned around and stomped away.

"Stop being a jerk!" Alexandra hissed.

Maximilian smirked. "Stop being a jerk, sir!" he whispered, and then gave her one of his heavy claps on the shoulder that nearly knocked her sideways. While she glared at him, he gave her a wink, and then rejoined his fellow Stormcrows. All of them snickered as they walked away, but Alexandra saw Martin wink at her as well.

"You're actually going to go?" Anna asked incredulously, back in their room, as they were changing out of their uniforms.

"They'll teach us dueling. Real dueling, not that pretend stuff we did on Halloween!"

Anna was completely unmoved by Alexandra's enthusiasm. "You mean that pretend stuff you did when Darla threw a pretend Killing Curse at you?"

Alexandra sighed. "Wouldn't you like to get something useful out of JROC?"

"No!" Anna exclaimed. "I'd like to get out of JROC! And you're actually going to go somewhere with Maximilian King, who made you fly into a tree? And Martin Nguyen, who's probably the reason Darla has gone crazy?"

Alexandra frowned. She almost started to defend Maximilian, and then realized that she couldn't blame Anna for thinking she was nuts.

"Beatrice will be there, too," she said.

"Oh, that makes me feel better! Like she wouldn't stand there laughing if the boys decide to tie you to a tree and summon a Hodag to eat you?"

"Summon a...?" Alexandra squinted at her friend. "Okay, aren't you being a little bit ridiculous?"

"Right, I'm always being ridiculous when I tell you you shouldn't do something you've already decided to do," Anna fumed. "Until afterwards, when it turns out I was right!" As Alexandra stared at her, Anna pulled on her weather-proof red cloak over her robes. "Go ahead and have fun with the Stormcrows. I'm going to the aviary to send a letter to my parents." She stalked out.

"Don't you think she's being a little ridiculous, Charlie?" Alexandra asked. She held out her hand, and Charlie flapped across the room and landed on her wrist.

"Troublesome," said the raven.

Alexandra stared at the bird. "Oh no," she groaned. "Don't you dare call me that!"

"Troublesome vexes, Troublesome woes," recited the raven.

"Who taught you that?" she demanded angrily.

Charlie made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a snicker.

"I was going to take you outside with me," Alexandra said, "but if you're going to insult me, you can stay here in your cage."

"Alexandra," cooed her familiar.

"Hah." She snorted, but allowed Charlie to remain perched on her shoulder as she walked out of the residential wing where Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall was located, and made her way to one of Charmbridge's back entrances, to the lawns and athletic fields outside.

She found Maximilian, Martin, and Beatrice all sitting by a sandpit where older students sometimes played Horseshoes & Hand Grenades. They had brooms leaning against the wooden rails around the pit. Alexandra frowned, realizing she didn't have a broom of her own. She walked over to the older teens, feeling a bit self-conscious. She had rarely seen any of the Stormcrows out of uniform. Now, Maximilian and Martin wore rough brown leather dusters over their pants and plain shirts, while Beatrice was wearing heavy outdoor robes. They all had on flying boots. Alexandra was the only one dressed like a Muggle, in her jeans and windbreaker.

Martin grinned. "Troublesome brought her raven."

"You don't get to call me that," Alexandra snapped.

Martin raised an eyebrow. "I thought the whole school called you that."

Alexandra glared at him. Mage-Corporal Nguyen had not bullied and berated her in JROC the way Maximilian had, but he was always smirking and making condescending remarks, and she hadn't forgotten his cruel treatment of Darla. She didn't like him at all – until recently, she would have said she disliked him more than any other Stormcrow except Maximilian. She was still undecided about Max.

“Don't pick on her, Martin,” admonished Beatrice. “That's her brother's job.”

Alexandra and the three BMI students stared at each other. She couldn't read any of their expressions. Finally, Maximilian broke the silence. “Come on. Let's fly.” He picked up his broom.

Charlie cawed, and Alexandra tilted her head to the side to avoid the raven's flapping wings. “I don't have a broom,” she pointed out.

Maximilian leveled his broom and swung one leg over it, while Martin and Beatrice did the same. “My broom can carry two easily enough,” he told her. And when Alexandra gave him a skeptical look, he raised an eyebrow. “What? I'm an excellent flier.”

She frowned, and got onto the broom behind him. She slid her arms around his waist, and he rose quickly, with the other two Stormcrows and Charlie following.

“Where are we going” Alexandra asked.

“How about the Glade?” suggested Martin.

“Can't bring seventh graders to the Glade,” Beatrice replied, which of course made Alexandra much more interested in going there, but Maximilian nodded.

“Down in the valley,” he decided. “It's out of sight of the school, even from students with telescopes.”

Alexandra thought students, at least underclass students, weren't supposed to leave school grounds either, but she wasn't about to

bring this up. She held onto Maximilian as he skimmed low above the treetops, heading in the same direction she had raced with him the day she'd flown into a tree. She looked over her shoulder, and saw Charlie flapping hard to keep up with them.

"Come on, Charlie, you slowpoke!" Alexandra called. Charlie cawed indignantly.

"Not many wizards have a raven familiar," Maximilian commented.

"I know." Alexandra watched the trees rushing past below them. "Because supposedly they're Dark. You don't believe that, do you?"

"No." He shook his head. Then, in a quieter voice she could barely hear as they reached the edge of the forest and hurtled out over the wide valley beyond, he said, "Father has a raven, too."

"I know."

He turned his head to look at her over his shoulder, and then looked ahead again, and leaned forward. They plummeted at a breathtakingly sharp angle, so it seemed that Alexandra was looking almost straight down at the murky river wending its way through the brown and gold trees at the bottom of the valley. Her stomach seemed to leap upwards, and she instinctively tightened her grip around her brother's waist, but she was exhilarated, not scared, and she laughed out loud. Maximilian flattened out just above the treetops, so quickly that his boots tore leaves and twigs loose in their wake, and Alexandra's stomach was now doing flip-flops. She heard Charlie screaming above them, and then Maximilian zipped around the trees in a descending spiral that brought them to a graveled riverbank, and braked hard enough that without the broom's Cushioning Charms, the broomstick would have left bruises on them both.

"Show-off!" snorted Beatrice, as she and Martin descended towards them at a more reasonable speed. Maximilian and Alexandra looked at each other, and they were both grinning. Then they both looked serious again and turned to wait for the other two Blacksbury students to land. Charlie fluttered down out of the sky and landed on Alexandra's shoulder.

“So are we really going to practice dueling?” Alexandra asked.

“No,” answered Martin, getting off his broom. “Actually, we're just going to use you for target practice. Start running.”

“Hah, hah,” Alexandra scoffed, while Charlie squawked at him. Her eyes darted briefly in Maximilian's direction, and then away again. She knew Martin was joking, but after almost being lured to her death several times last year, and being Crucioed only a week before, it wasn't that funny. She was suddenly hearing Anna's voice in her ears again, warning her about what the Stormcrows might be up to: “I'm always being ridiculous, until it turns out I was right!”

“Yes, we're going to practice dueling,” Maximilian told her. “But not formal dueling, like you'll learn in a dueling club. Real wizard-dueling.”

“What's that?” Alexandra asked.

“Dueling without all the bowing and timeouts and rules about what spells you can throw,” said Martin.

“We do still restrain ourselves,” Beatrice said. “We don't want to actually hurt each other.”

“Much,” Martin added, with a wink.

Alexandra was intrigued now, though it sounded like nothing more than a rougher game of hexem. She watched as Maximilian, Martin, and Beatrice each took up a position approximately a dozen paces apart, at three points of an imaginary triangle. Maximilian was closest to the river, with his back to the water. He gestured at Alexandra. “You stay out of the way, and just watch. Don't interfere!”

“Okay,” she said. She stood by a large rock, a few yards from him.

The three older students each held their wands at the ready, and seemed to be waiting for some common signal. They looked at each other, and Maximilian and Beatrice nodded. “Go!” they all yelled together, and suddenly the late-afternoon shadows in the valley were

banished by flashes of red and blue and yellow light, as the three Stormcrows waved their wands back and forth, shouting hexes and jinxes that went sizzling and zinging through the air at each other. They stood their ground for a few seconds, and then Beatrice dived and rolled to avoid a flash of fire from Maximilian's wand, while Martin backed away towards the trees as he tried to block one hex after another being directed at him by the other two. Some went wild, and some narrowly missed him as he ducked and weaved.

Maximilian didn't move, just kept throwing hexes at his friends, and whipped his wand about to block their return fire. One stray bolt struck the rock near Alexandra's head, showering her with stone fragments. She jumped, and then crouched lower. Martin yowled in frustration when Beatrice caught him with a Leg-Locker Curse and he toppled onto his side. He tried to Petrify her, but she rolled out of the way and threw a Severing Charm at the tree over his head. As a branch fell across him, she spun about just in time to catch a Stunning Spell right in the chest. She toppled backwards and her head hit the ground hard enough to send gravel flying. Maximilian smiled triumphantly, and walked over to check on his groaning friends.

Alexandra had watched the entire duel with an open mouth. Although they hadn't thrown any truly deadly spells, the jets of flame and the flying tree branches were definitely capable of causing injury. She knew they'd never be allowed to toss spells like that in Charmbridge's Dueling Club.

"That was so cool!" she breathed, standing up and walking over to join Maximilian.

"Cool?" Maximilian looked at her and raised an eyebrow. Beatrice accepted a hand from him, and was rising slowly to her feet.

"Ready for another round?" Maximilian asked them.

"Yeah, let me just take this damned Leg-Locker Curse off," Martin grumbled, pushing the tree branch off.

Alexandra's eyes were wide as she watched them all take up positions a second time. Once more, they all began throwing curses

at once, and as before, Maximilian stayed rooted in place, while Martin and Beatrice began what Ms. Shirtliffe called 'tactical maneuvers.' This time the two of them concentrated their fire on Maximilian, forcing him to block more, and a bright orange fireball from Beatrice's wand nearly singed his eyebrows off. She had her wand pointed directly at him for a moment, while his was too low, pointing at the ground, and she grinned as the incantation for another jinx formed on her lips. Then a sheet of gravel suddenly flew out from under her as Maximilian gestured, taking her feet with her. She landed hard on her back, Maximilian whipped his wand around and hurled a curse Alexandra had never heard before that caught Martin right in the face, and then turned to hit Beatrice with another Stunning Charm before she could stand up. This time, she collapsed and didn't move.

"Wow!" Alexandra exclaimed. She stared at Maximilian, who was cool and untouched.

"GrmmIn Mrx whynd harfto sqmlsh mmeem fush?" Martin mumbled unintelligibly, with his hands over his face. It looked as if his skin were dripping.

"Check on Bea," Maximilian ordered, and walked over to help Martin.

Alexandra ran to the fallen girl's side. Beatrice was unconscious, but groaned and opened her eyes when Alexandra shook her shoulder gently.

"You all right?" Alexandra asked.

"Fabulous," Beatrice gasped. She took a deep breath. "Stunning Spells hurt, in case you didn't know."

"Some spells hurt worse," Alexandra muttered, while Beatrice struggled to a sitting position. "I thought you had him for a moment."

"So did I." The other girl sighed. "But Max usually wins, even when it's two against one. He's very good."

Alexandra nodded.

"You want to try, Alexandra?" Maximilian asked. She looked up at him. She wasn't used to him calling her "Alexandra" instead of "Quick."

Martin's face was still looking a little soft and misshapen, and he was moving his jaw as if trying to make it work properly again.

"Okay." She wondered how much this was going to hurt, but she didn't hesitate.

Maximilian smiled wryly. "You're not ready for no spells barred. We'll start with some basics."

She glanced at Martin and Beatrice – they were now wrestling over a camera, as Beatrice was trying to snap a picture of Martin's doughy, squashed face, and he was trying to prevent her – and then she turned her attention to Maximilian's lessons.

He spent the next half hour showing Alexandra how to stand, and how to loosen her wrist just enough to keep her wand ready to flip in any direction, while holding her fingers tightly enough to avoid losing control of it. Then he allowed her to cast the few jinxes she knew at him, while he did nothing in return, merely blocked everything she threw. She tried catching him by surprise, but it was hopeless.

"Now block," he commanded. "Stupefy!" The red beam of light flashed by her head and she waved her wand at it, a split-second after it had already passed her by.

"Too slow," he snapped. "Stupefy!" This time it hit her in the chest even as she was moving her wand to block it. She staggered backwards, and her body went numb from her hip to her neck, but she knew he'd hit her with only a fraction of what he could have. Grimacing, she tried to block the next one, and actually succeeded. She beamed, and then he zapped her in the head.

She saw red and blacked out. When she opened her eyes again, the side of her head hurt. Beatrice was holding her up, brushing gravel off of her face.

“Smile!” said Martin, and a flash blinded her as he took a picture of her, sitting on the ground, dazed and battered.

She glowered at him, and then looked at her brother. “Again.”

Maximilian laughed. “Not tonight. It's almost dark.” In fact, down in the valley, they could barely see the last rays of sunlight reflecting off the cliffs above them. “Besides, if we bring you back any more bruised, Colonel Shirliffe will think we dragged you out into the woods and beat you.”

Maximilian put a hand on her shoulder as they walked back over to their brooms. “Not bad, though,” he commented.

Alexandra received a letter from her mother on Thanksgiving Day; owls, unlike the Post Office, didn't stop working on holidays. She gave the owl a treat, and it hooted and flew back out the window of her room. As she walked down to the cafeteria for dinner, she unwrapped the string around the letter, wondering just how her mother addressed letters to her. She'd never seen a postal address for Charmbridge Academy, but she knew her mother wasn't sending owls.

As usual, Claudia Green mostly wrote about mundane details – bothersome administrators and patients at the hospital where she worked, Archie's fishing trip, and the unusually dry weather in Larkin Mills this fall. But at the bottom of the letter, she concluded:

“Lastly, I think you'll be pleased about this, Alex: we're finally moving out of this apartment, and guess where we're moving to? They've just finished rebuilding our house, and after struggling with the insurance company for almost a year, we've finally received our settlement. You know that Archie wasn't eager to keep our old property – financial details you wouldn't be interested in, but it will mean a larger mortgage than we had before. But I finally talked him into it. So, when you come home for Christmas, you'll be coming back to 207 Sweetmaple Avenue. I hope you're as happy as I am!”

Alexandra was indeed surprised at her reaction to the thought of going back home – even if it wouldn't really be the same house. She

swallowed, and then cleared her throat as she saw Maximilian in the corridor ahead of her. She was almost never homesick, and never admitted it when she was.

“What's that?” he asked, pointing at the paper in her hand.

“Letter from home,” she replied, as if it were nothing particularly interesting. She tucked it into her pants pocket as she stood in front of him.

They were both in uniform, even though there had been no classes today. Wearing uniforms to the Thanksgiving feast was optional for the JROC, but most of them chose to do so. Alexandra, after thinking it over, had agreed to let Beatrice Hawthorne and Charlotte Barker, one of the Charmbridge JROC's ninth graders, help her assemble a proper dress uniform. Now she felt a little silly. But Maximilian, she had to admit, looked magnificent. The Stormcrows' dress uniforms had ominous black crows bearing lightning bolts blazoned on their chests, and they moved.

“Not bad,” he commented, looking her over. He adjusted a cord looped around her shoulder. “You're starting to look like a proper wand, Quick.” He smiled at her when she gave him a sour look, then let the smile drop for a moment. “This is the first Thanksgiving I've ever been away from home,” he admitted.

“Really? Isn't Blacksburg a boarding school, like Charmbridge?”

He nodded. “But my family lives nearby, so I always get released to go home over Thanksgiving weekend.”

“Oh.” She found herself thinking of home again.

As if reading her mind, her brother looked down at her and asked, “Your parents... you said you have a stepfather. Is he kind to you? Has your mother taken good care of you?”

“Yeah, sure.” She shrugged. “They don't know I'm a witch. But they're okay, I guess, for Muggles.”

“How can they not know you're a witch?”

“I'm not allowed to use magic when I go home,” she muttered. She heard the Boggart speaking in her mother's voice again: “Do you really think I don't know what you are?”

“But still, they ought to know. I mean, what do they think you're learning all year?”

She shrugged again. “Muggle stuff, I guess.”

He frowned. “It's not right, having to pretend to be a Muggle when you're not at school.”

“You're not one of those fanatics who thinks Muggles are inferior, are you?”

“Of course Muggles are inferior. They can't do magic,” Maximilian replied, as if he were simply stating an obvious fact. When he noticed her scowl, he added, “But it's not their fault. I don't have anything against them.”

Alexandra didn't find that answer very satisfying, but decided not to start arguing with him.

“Want to go flying on Saturday?” he asked.

“With Martin and Beatrice?”

“No. Just us.” He regarded her seriously. “I thought I might teach you how to turn faster and brake harder, and what to do if you're about to lose control of your broom.”

She looked back at him, with an equally serious expression. “Only if you promise there won't be any collisions with trees.”

His cheek twitched, as if he were trying not to wince. Then he noticed Alexandra struggling to keep a straight face.

“If there are, it won't be my fault.” He smiled slightly.

She smiled back. "Okay."

They walked into the cafeteria, which had been converted into a banquet hall for Thanksgiving, and was now decorated with pumpkins, squashes, and multicolored ears of corn growing from magical mini-cornfields planted right where the serving lines were normally located. These produced fresh, hot popcorn when shaken. The Clockwork servers were gone; house-elves prepared the Thanksgiving feast, a tradition they looked forward to as much as the students did, despite protests from ASPEW.

Many eyes turned in their direction as Maximilian and Alexandra walked into the cafeteria together. He looked down at her, and whispered, "See you Saturday."

She nodded, and walked over to join her friends at the table where most of the seventh graders sat, while Maximilian joined his fellow BMI students.

"Well, ain't you decked fine!" declared Constance, as Alexandra sat down.

"Ain't seen macaroni like that since the Regiment visited the Ozarks for the last Jubilee," agreed Forbearance.

"Yeah, you look great," Anna said sullenly. She was the only JROC student who wasn't in uniform, and she had left their room in disgust when Charlotte and Beatrice came to help Alexandra put hers together.

"Thanks," Alexandra replied.

"Max looks pretty good, too," giggled Angelique. Alexandra rolled her eyes. Darla had once again gone home for Thanksgiving weekend, and Angelique almost seemed more cheerful.

Dean Grimm gave a brief speech, before the house-elves began materializing food on their tables, and everyone stuffed themselves on turkey, ham, duck, deer, rabbit, and pheasant, accompanied by

potatoes, corn, yams, greens, biscuits and bread, and a hundred other treats.

It was a splendid feast, and even Anna relaxed and stopped looking so resentful. David had begun telling the other girls how Muggles celebrated Thanksgiving.

“Course that's just the fairy tale version people like better than the real story, just like here,” David concluded.

“How do you mean?” asked Constance.

“Never mind,” David grumbled, catching the looks Alexandra and Anna were exchanging. “Let's just give thanks to the Indians who ain't here because white people killed them off.”

Angelique looked uncomfortable. Constance and Forbearance looked more so.

“How about giving thanks to the house-elves while you're at it?” Alexandra suggested. “Is that your third helping?”

He flushed, and didn't bring up Indians again. Despite his sullenness, the rest of the feast passed pleasantly enough, with Constance and Forbearance asking more innocuous questions about Muggle holiday traditions. David became enthusiastic once more as he described NFL football to the Ozarkers. He seemed to be trying to engage Angelique's interest as well, but she looked bored.

Everyone shuffled slowly back to their rooms when the feast was over. Alexandra was regretting wearing her uniform now; she felt as if she'd been squeezed into it. She unwrapped a handkerchief full of stuffing and dumped it onto her desk. Charlie made an eager sound, and fluttered down to the desk to begin gobbling the crumbs. Alexandra looked in Nigel's cage, and sighed. “Sorry, Nigel. I thought about bringing you some Cockroach Clusters, but I don't think snakes like chocolate.”

Nigel stuck his tongue out indifferently.

“Did Max ask you to wear a uniform to the feast tonight?” Anna asked. She had been quiet all evening.

“No. I just felt like it,” Alexandra replied. She shrugged off her jacket, and put a hand over her mouth to cover a burp.

Anna frowned at her. “We’re only in JROC because Dean Grimm made us,” she said. “You’re letting Max bully you, aren’t you?”

“No,” Alexandra insisted, annoyed. “He’s really not that bad, Anna.”

Anna stared at her. “Not that bad?” Her voice had an unfortunate habit of rising to a squeaky pitch when she was upset. “He’s worse than Larry Albo!”

Alexandra sighed. She was tired, and she didn’t want to argue with Anna. “Whatever.” She peeled off her clothes and pulled on the baggy long-sleeved shirt she wore to bed. She ignored Anna’s incredulous look as she hung her uniform carefully in the closet, and then brushed her teeth before going to bed.

Maximilian’s flying lesson was much better than anything they’d done in JROC. Without him shouting at her and making her fly in rigid patterns, she was able to relax and push herself more. They took their brooms down into the valley again, because Maximilian still wasn’t supposed to be taking younger students out flying without adult supervision. In fact, younger students weren’t supposed to fly beyond school grounds at all; they were both risking serious trouble if they were caught. But that didn’t bother Alexandra, and it didn’t seem to bother Maximilian. He challenged her to a race again – this time flying above the trees – and beat her easily. By that afternoon, she was able to duplicate a few of his maneuvers, but the difference between growing up as a wizard, and being introduced to brooms and magic at age eleven, was obvious.

Sitting on a rock by the river, eating leftovers from Thursday’s feast, they heard the rumble of a distant motor. Along the ‘Muggle’ side of the valley, separated from Charmbridge Academy by the Invisible Bridge, there was a two-lane highway, and cars and trucks occasionally passed by in both directions. Alexandra didn’t even

know exactly where they'd be coming from or going to. She'd heard Muggle hikers sometimes came down into the valley, too, which was why it was off-limits to students, but that didn't stop a lot of juniors and seniors from sneaking down here.

"I want to practice dueling again," she said.

Maximilian smiled. "Okay. Not today, though."

"You promised you'd teach me all the magic you know."

"I can't teach you everything I know in a few days. I had to go to school for six years, and you will, too."

"But you know spells most eleventh graders don't." She studied him. "Did he teach you any magic?"

He chewed his turkey on a roll, looking out across the river. "Maybe a few charms," he admitted.

She and Maximilian hadn't talked much about their father. She was curious about him, but he insisted he really didn't know him much better than she did – he had only met him a few times since he was little. She asked him about everything she'd read about Abraham Thorn – his alliance with the Dark Convention, his trip to Britain to meet with Lord Voldemort, the Thorn Circle's attempted assassination of Governor-General Hucksteen.

"He's not evil, Alexandra." Maximilian sighed, and stretched out on his back by the riverbank, though it was cold now, even with the sun overhead. He held a hand up to shade his eyes. "He's not a Dark wizard, like they say. He probably does have ties to the Dark Convention – he knows a lot of people. Not everyone in the Dark Convention is a curse-monger or a poisoner. Some of them just hate the Confederation. Enemies of your enemy, you know?"

"Why is he an enemy of the Confederation?"

"Politics."

She frowned. "Politics" seemed like an awfully poor excuse to become the most wanted wizard in the Confederation.

"Why did he get married and divorced so many times, and have so many kids and then never see them?"

Maximilian frowned and sat up. "He does see us, when he can," he said seriously, looking at her. "You'll get to meet him, Alexandra. I'm sure he wants to see you."

"Maybe not," she replied. "I'm just a half-blood, after all. Maybe he never even expected me to be a witch."

"How could any daughter of Abraham Thorn not be a witch?" Maximilian scoffed. He shook his head. "Alexandra, I can't answer all the questions you have about him. Only he can. I'm sure he will, someday." He rose to his feet. "Come on, we should get back."

"I want to fly some more," she said. "And learn some more hexes."

"Soon," he promised. "Not today."

She studied his face. "You have a meeting tonight, don't you?"

He looked back at her gravely. "It's better if we don't talk about that."

"What are they having you do now?" she asked quietly.

He shook his head. "Stop worrying." He held his hand out. "Accio broom!" His broom flew into his hand.

Her eyes widened. "Teach me that!"

"I didn't start learning Summoning Charms until tenth grade. I'll start teaching you – another day – but it won't do you any good if you aren't learning the basics in your Charms class."

"I'm doing fine in class," she grumbled. "But we're just studying Ringing Charms and Sticking and Unsticking Charms." Why the teachers acted surprised that for the last week, kids were being glued

to walls and floors, and hallways were echoing with the pealing of bells, all over school, she had no idea. She'd had her own feet stuck to the floor several times a day, but she'd gotten good at quickly Unsticking herself.

"Like I said, you need to learn the basics." They got on their brooms. "We've got SPAWNs in a month. I hope you're studying hard for them."

"Every day," she replied, rolling her eyes. The Standardized Practical Assessment of Wizarding kNowledge was given to every student in the Confederation twice a year. Some kids made quite a big deal over them; since Alexandra's parents would never see her results, she was happy as long as she didn't look bad, or get put back in remedial classes, as had happened after her first SPAWN.

When they landed back in front of the gym, after taking a circuitous route that made it seem as if they'd just been flying around the school, Alexandra spotted Darla outside. She was raking leaves with the Clockworks, something Alexandra had had to do last year as part of her own detention. Right now, though, Darla was staring at her and Maximilian. Alexandra smiled and gave a mock-cheerful wave. Darla turned back to the Clockworks she was supervising.

"You really aren't doing anything... bad, are you, Max?" Alexandra asked quietly, as they put their brooms away.

He looked at her, and shook his head. "Nothing for you to worry about, Alexandra."

"Alex," she said.

He raised his eyebrows, puzzled.

"I guess if I can call you Max, you can call me Alex, right?"

He studied her a moment, then smiled slowly. "Right."

"But not in public."

“Right, in public you're still a hexed-up new wand, Quick.” He grinned at her, and then patted her cheek, and Alexandra knew he was doing it just to embarrass her. She glowered at him, without really feeling much anger, as he walked away, waving over his shoulder. When she turned around, she saw Darla still staring at her. Alexandra snorted, and went inside to find Anna and the Pritchards.

The Dark Side

Alexandra spent several afternoons and evenings with Maximilian during the month of December, sometimes with Beatrice and Martin, and sometimes without. When Maximilian's friends were along, they practiced wizard-dueling.

Alexandra was thrilled – though she was less thrilled to discover that all three Stormcrows were far better than her.

“What did you expect, Troublesome?” Martin laughed, as Alexandra picked herself up off the ground for the sixth time one day. “We've been doing this for years. Did you really think a seventh grader could take us, just because you're Abraham Thorn's daughter?”

She glared at him furiously. Her elbows and knees ached, she had bruises up and down her body, and her tongue had been swollen by a jinx, so she could barely talk. And worse, Beatrice was taking pictures again.

“Ease off, Martin.” Maximilian smiled at Alexandra. “You're doing well. But he's right; you shouldn't expect that after a little bit of practice, you'll suddenly be as good as us. We've been hexing the snot out of each other for years.”

“Yeah, jusht wait 'n shee,” she mumbled around her enlarged tongue. She was pleased that Maximilian thought she was doing well, but it was frustrating to be so outmatched.

The camaraderie among her brother's friends was something she increasingly came to enjoy. They teased her a great deal, which annoyed her, but she still felt much older and more mature for being allowed to hang around with them.

She listened to the three of them talk about Blacksburg, and their teachers, and Roanoke Territory. They compared Charmbridge Academy to BMI (generally unfavorably, though they admitted that Charmbridge had better food). Alexandra learned that Martin was originally from Florida, and that his parents were second-generation

New Colonials, and that Beatrice was an Old Colonial from a strict Plymouth Traditionalist family.

The teenagers didn't ask Alexandra many questions. She thought they might be curious about the Muggle world, but they weren't. Or perhaps Maximilian had told them not to ask her about it.

In JROC, Alexandra found herself trying much harder to learn drills and cadences and defensive charms, striving for the occasional smile of approval she got from her brother. Colonel Shirliffe noticed the change as well, and seemed pleased, though now and then, Alexandra saw the teacher giving her and Maximilian puzzled looks.

Even as she grew closer to her brother, Alexandra realized that she and Anna were spending less time together. Anna was as unenthusiastic as ever about JROC (though she had stopped whining so much), but Alexandra no longer commiserated with her about how awful JROC and the Stormcrows were.

They still sat together in the cafeteria and in class, and they still studied together, but Anna was quiet, almost resentful. Alexandra tried to draw her out, but she was getting tired of her roommate's attitude, just because she didn't hate Maximilian anymore. And any sadness she felt at the silent rift between them was overshadowed by her budding relationship with her brother, who seemed more smart and cool and capable every day.

He was an excellent student and a talented wizard, he was handsome and popular, and while most evenings he spent with his BMI friends, on the days he allowed her to tag along, he never acted like she was an annoying little sister that he didn't want following him around. They practiced many new hexes and curses, and with Maximilian's help, Alexandra thought she was probably the best flier in seventh grade now. She loved their private lessons, even if it did mean Anna kept giving her unhappy looks when she snuck off.

In the forests around Charmbridge Academy, it was as dry as it was down in Larkin Mills. Though the temperature was now frequently below freezing at night, they had yet to see any snow, and hopes of a white Christmas seemed dim. This didn't bother Alexandra much;

she'd seen enough snow to last her the rest of her life last Christmas. But as the winter break approached, a very strange realization came over her: she was going to miss Maximilian.

In the week before their end-of-semester SPAWNs, Ms. Shirtliffe had the JROC students actually run mock combat drills in the air, dodging obstacles that she and Mage-Sergeant Majors Smith and Franklin threw at them. Alexandra veered and zig-zagged to evade the Paint-Bludgers chasing her, when Franklin threw a Dandelion Grenade. It burst near her, spraying puffy white seeds everywhere. Alexandra ascended quickly so the wind wouldn't carry any into her path, then heard Anna scream in frustration as several seeds brushed against her uniform, and suddenly she was sprouting bright yellow flowers from head to toe.

"If those had been Basilisk Barbs or Plague Pods, you'd be dead, Chu!" barked Ms. Shirtliffe.

"I'm never going to face Basilisk Barbs or Plague Pods, because in one more week I'm never going to wear this uniform again!" Anna declared angrily, as she landed. "It's not as if I'm ever going to join the ROC after I graduate! Like being ordered around just so someday I can be the one screaming at people is something to look forward to? Or killing trolls and snake-men and manticores, when we're not going to war with other wizards? Who actually likes this stuff? No one in their right mind!"

Bitterly, she threw her broom on the ground and stomped away, ignoring Shirtliffe's angry demands for her to come back. Alexandra was shocked. Anna was usually so timid; she'd never seen her friend lose it quite like that before.

"Pathetic," sneered Supriya Chandra, one of the older JROC girls. "Thinks she's too good for the JROC? We can make her last week a living hell!"

"Please don't," Alexandra pleaded. She appealed to Ms. Shirtliffe. "She's just upset, ma'am. It's not her fault she never wanted to do this. It's only one more week. Just let her finish it and be done."

Shirtliffe folded her arms. "What about you, Quick? Are you going to be done after this week?"

Alexandra stood there, with a startled look on her face. It had been weeks since she'd thought about how much she was looking forward to being done with JROC. At the end of the semester, her forced enlistment would be over, and she would be free to choose some other elective next semester.

She glanced at Maximilian, who was watching her with a neutral expression, and then back at the Witch-Colonel.

"I don't know, ma'am," she muttered.

"Hmm." Shirtliffe gave her a narrow look, then shrugged. "Up to you. You have plenty of room for improvement, Quick." Then she called everyone back into formation, and dismissed them for the day.

Maximilian caught her before she went back inside.

"Meet me tonight, by the Quidditch field, after dinner?" he whispered.

"After dark?" she whispered back. Underclass students weren't supposed to be outside the academy building after dark. Although the restrictive wards and alarms put in place after Halloween had been lifted, the staff was still much more vigilant than before, and additional safeguards had been added, such as portraits from the Dean's office that were now hung at every exit.

"Can you manage it without being caught?" Maximilian asked.

"Of course I can." She nodded. "Okay. What are we doing?"

"I'll tell you then, but dress warm."

"King," said Colonel Shirtliffe, and Maximilian let go of Alexandra's arm. He nodded to her, and she walked back inside as he turned around and marched over to the teacher.

Alexandra was curious. None of their previous private lessons had been after dark. When she returned to her room, she found Anna sitting on her bed, with her face in her hands. Her dandelion-covered uniform was crumpled on the floor.

Alexandra sighed and sat down next to Anna on her bed. She put an arm around her friend.

"It's only one more week, Anna," she said.

"Ms. Shirtliffe is going to report me to the Dean. I'm going to be given detention. Dean Grimm might even make me do JROC again next semester!" Anna shuddered. "Not that it matters – if another disciplinary letter goes home to my parents, my father will pull me out of school and make me go to a day school back in San Francisco."

"I don't think Ms. Shirtliffe is going to report you to the Dean. Let's try to fix your uniform before those dandelions become impossible to remove."

Anna sniffed, and nodded.

By the time they went to dinner, Anna had calmed down. She proposed they spend all weekend studying for their SPAWNs. Alexandra agreed, and down in the cafeteria, the two of them sat with David and Constance and Forbearance. Everyone talked about their holiday plans. Alexandra mentioned casually that she was going to be moving back into her old house. Constance and Forbearance had been quite homesick for the past month, and were looking forward to returning to their 'holler' in the Ozarks for a couple of weeks. David told them his family was going to have a large gathering of extended relatives over the Christmas holidays.

Everything felt almost normal again, until Alexandra returned to her room after dinner, and put on her winter jacket. Anna looked at her curiously.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Just out," Alexandra replied.

“Out,” Anna repeated, with an empty expression.

“Anna, why do you have to make a big deal out of everything?” Alexandra lowered her voice. “I’m not going to meet with the Mors Mortis Society, if that’s what you’re thinking!”

“That’s not what I’m thinking.” Anna looked down. “I’m thinking that this year everything has been a big secret. You never tell me anything.”

Alexandra sighed. “It’s not because I don’t trust you. And it’s no big deal.”

“If it’s no big deal, why is it a secret?”

“Just trust me. I – I’ll tell you later. I will.”

“Fine,” Anna said. She gave Alexandra another blank stare. “Have fun with Max.”

Alexandra scowled at her, then shook her head. “Charlie, come with me,” she commanded. The raven cawed, then fluttered to her shoulder. Alexandra and her familiar left their room, and she made her way downstairs, to the same back entrance she’d used when she was sneaking out for Mors Mortis Society meetings.

She was relieved to find the small portrait hanging there empty. The hall monitors almost never left their stations, but the portraits taken from the Dean’s office tended to wander about and visit each other when bored. She shushed Charlie and hurried out the door before Dean Nietz returned to his frame.

It was dark and cold as she trudged across Charmbridge’s lawn to the Quidditch field, wondering about Max’s choice to meet out here after dark. They’d never done that before. Was he planning to show her something forbidden, that he couldn’t risk being discovered inside? Maybe something to do with the Mors Mortis Society? That didn’t make any sense, since he was reluctant to talk about the Mors Mortis Society and his ‘mission’ at all anymore. While she was

puzzling over this, Charlie squawked a warning, and only then did she realize that the Quidditch field wasn't empty. There were several kids sitting on the bleachers, near the ground level, and they stood up when Alexandra approached.

"What are you doing here, Troublesome?" demanded a familiar voice.

Alexandra groaned. "What are you doing here, Larry?"

She could hardly make out the other two people with him, as the moon wasn't casting very much light that night, but she was sure it was Ethan Robinson and Wade White. This was confirmed when Charlie let out another cry of warning as a pair of aggressive owls swooped by her head.

"You'd better make your familiars back off," she warned. She had her wand out already. She could see by the way Larry was standing that he did, too. He jumped off the bleachers and took two steps towards her.

"Or what?" he sneered.

She pointed her wand at him. He laughed.

"Quick, I'll turn you into a gnome and feed you to your friend's jarvey if you don't broom out of here."

"Try it. I'll switch your head and your butt around – not that anyone will be able to tell the difference!"

"You're all talk, Quick. You've got the whole school thinking you're some kind of dangerous sorceress because your daddy is a Dark wizard. I know you're just an arrogant little brat. Do you actually think you can beat me if we cross wands?"

Ethan and Wade were coming up behind Larry now. Alexandra could smell a distinctive odor wafting off of them. She wrinkled her nose. "Are you smoking?"

"I said broom, Quick!" Larry snapped.

She laughed at him. "You guys are idiots! Even Muggles think that's disgusting, you know."

Larry flicked his wand at her, and said, "Kikksprong!" Alexandra jumped aside as a green spark bounced off the ground where she'd been standing and rebounded off into the darkness, with a sound like a rubber ball. She threw a Spinning Jinx that missed Larry but hit Ethan, who began spinning wildly around and knocked Wade over. Then Larry shouted, "Caedarus!" A tiny spark flew from his wand, expanding rapidly into a solid-looking sphere that struck Alexandra in the face with a loud smack. She cried out and fell backwards, and blinked away tears as the red haze cleared from her vision. The entire side of her face stung.

Larry stood over her, with his wand pointing right between her eyes. Charlie screeched and dived at his face, but was forced to veer away as the boys' owls began chasing the raven.

"Best two out of three?" she mumbled, rubbing her face. This wasn't looking good. Where was Maximilian?

Larry snickered. "What should we do with her?"

Wade had finally grabbed Ethan and held him down long enough for him to stop spinning, but Ethan was too dizzy to stand. "Tie her to a tree and leave her for the Hodag," Wade suggested.

Alexandra tried to raise her wand, and then yelped when Larry stepped on her hand, still holding his wand pointed at her head. "Not a chance, Troublesome."

"Creep!" She struggled, then gasped as Larry shifted more weight onto his foot. Meanwhile, Ethan and Wade were both shooting sparks out of their wands into the sky, trying to scare Charlie away. "Stop it!" she cried.

"Aww, is Twoublesome gonna cwy?" Larry taunted. He looked at his friends. "Hey, I know. She likes pretending she's Dark so much, why don't we show her some real Dark magic?"

The other two ninth graders lowered their wands and looked at him. "What do you mean?" Ethan asked.

Larry looked down at Alexandra. "I'll bet you and Dearborn both set that whole thing up on Halloween. Have her pretend to cast a Killing Curse at you, just so everyone would be impressed when you beat her."

"You're crazy," Alexandra growled, through gritted teeth. "Darla almost got expelled for that! We didn't plan anything! Get off my hand!"

"Yeah, right." Larry grinned at her, then said, "Since you and your friend have read about Unforgivables, I guess you know what the Cruciatus Curse is?"

Alexandra stopped struggling, and felt a cold chill. She stared at Larry, and all her attention was suddenly focused on the tip of his wand.

"You wouldn't," she whispered.

Larry's eyes gleamed triumphantly, as he saw the defiance drain out of her for the first time. "Scared, Quick?" Behind him, Ethan and Wade snickered, a little nervously. Larry suddenly thrust his wand at her, and said, "Crucio!"

Alexandra's reaction was involuntary. It was as if she were on the floor of that room in Charmbridge's deepest basement again. She screamed and curled up into a ball, covering her face with her other hand.

Only when she realized that Larry had backed away, and was no longer standing on her hand, did she look up. She was shaking. Larry was staring at her, with a puzzled, contemptuous expression.

"Blue balls, Larry!" Ethan whispered, sounding horrified.

"Oh, calm down!" Larry snapped at him. "You don't think I actually did it, do you?" He turned back to Alexandra, who was now rising to her feet. "Not so brave after all, are you, Quick?"

Alexandra couldn't stop trembling. "Shut up!" she hissed. The memory of thrashing helplessly on the ground, with her entire body on fire, was stuck in her head now, and she could almost feel her skin burning.

Ethan laughed. Wade brandished his wand dramatically, and loudly intoned, "Crucio!" while jabbing it in her direction.

Alexandra tried not to react, but she couldn't help it. She didn't scream this time, but she flinched away from him and nearly dropped her wand. Her pulse was racing uncontrollably and her breath came in short gasps.

Rage and humiliation washed over her as Ethan and Wade doubled over with laughter. Larry was staring at her again. He'd lowered his wand, and he was frowning. For a moment, he almost looked guilty. And then a dark shape came lunging out of the shadows and knocked him flat on his back.

"Impedimenta!" Maximilian roared, pointing his wand at Ethan and Wade, and both of them stumbled and fell over. Maximilian turned back to Larry, stepped forward, and as the younger boy rose to his hands and knees, aimed a great sweeping kick directly into his midsection. His boot caught Larry right in the stomach, hard enough to lift him into the air and drop him back onto the ground, gasping for breath. "You miserable stinking piece of filth!" Maximilian bellowed, giving Larry another hard kick in the ribs. Larry cried out in pain.

Alexandra winced at the impact. "Max, stop it!"

"Are you all right?" he asked. His eyes were ablaze, and his expression was fearsome.

She gulped and nodded. She was afraid she was about to start crying, and she couldn't bear that.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here sooner," he panted. "I didn't know these dung-eating trolls would be here bothering you."

She swallowed. "It's all right. I'm all right."

"I saw what he did." Maximilian turned to face Larry again, who was now on his knees, with his arms wrapped around his stomach. "If you ever go near my s – Alexandra again, if you touch her, or even look at her, I swear, I will kill you."

"You're insane!" Larry gasped.

"Insane? Do you want to see insane?" Maximilian snarled. He pointed his wand at Larry, and said, "Crucio!"

Larry jerked backwards. His spine arched grotesquely, and he began screaming.

"Are you Squibs laughing now?" Maximilian yelled.

Alexandra stared, for one horrified second, and then she rushed forward and grabbed Maximilian's arm.

"Max, stop it!" she shouted. "Stop it now!" She was still shaking, and Maximilian's arm was like a solid block of wood, with more strength than she had in her whole body. It hardly budged even when she jerked hard on his wrist, but he turned his head towards her, and that awful, enraged look on his face faded. He let Alexandra pull his arm down, and Larry let out a whimpering moan, and collapsed limply on the ground.

Alexandra stared at her brother for a moment, and then walked over to the other boy.

"L–Larry?" she stammered hesitantly. She started to kneel next to him, and he sat up and scooted backward on the ground, kicking out at her.

"Get away from me!" he gasped. His face was pale. Beneath his dark curly hair, there was a sheen of sweat on his forehead, despite the

near-freezing temperature. He rose awkwardly to his feet. "Stay away from me, you rotten little gorgon!"

Maximilian made an angry sound, and Alexandra spun around to glare at him. He paused, still glowering at Larry, but he didn't move.

Larry was staring at the two of them, wide-eyed. "You're both demented!" he choked. "You ought to be bound and chained on Eerie Island!"

Alexandra licked her lips, which felt as if they were becoming dry and cracked.

Larry looked at Ethan and Wade, who were still tangled on the ground, moving sluggishly.

"Finite incantatem!" he said, pointing his wand at his friends. It took him three more tries to lift Maximilian's Impediment Jinx, and the other two boys sprang to their feet, staring at the older boy in shock and fear.

"Let's get out of here," Wade quavered.

"You're crazy! Both of you!" Larry repeated. All three of them turned and fled back toward the academy.

Alexandra turned slowly to face Maximilian. His expression was sullen, and a little abashed.

"You are crazy," she said. "If they tell on you, you'll be expelled for sure! You could even be arrested!"

"They won't tell. They weren't supposed to be out here either, and they'd be punished for what they did to you, too."

Alexandra shook her head. "So you planned it out?"

"No!" Maximilian protested. "Alex —"

She held up a hand, and backed away from him.

“Alex, wait,” he pleaded. She shook her head and turned away from him.

“Charlie!” she called out. “Charlie, where are you?”

The raven cawed, and then landed on her shoulder.

“We're going back inside, Charlie,” Alexandra said.

“Alexandra!” Maximilian called behind her, but she ignored him, and he didn't pursue her.

By the time Alexandra arrived back in her room, she felt numb. Her expression was empty as she regarded Anna, who was sitting at her desk doing Geomancy problems. Charlie croaked and hopped onto the top of Nigel's cage, as Alexandra shrugged off her coat and shivered. Anna didn't say anything, but was looking at her as if she very much wanted to say something.

Alexandra ran her fingertips lightly over Charlie's feathers, and the raven preened and made soothing, clucking sounds.

“Are you all right?” Anna asked at last.

“Fine,” Alexandra replied.

“Did he hit you again?” Anna asked.

Alexandra blinked, and stared at her roommate. “What?”

“Your face is red,” Anna whispered. “Like someone smacked you.”

Alexandra raised a hand to her face, which still stung from Larry's hex. “I –” She paused. “Did who hit me? What do you mean, 'again'?”

Anna swallowed. “You know who I mean. If you want me to leave you alone, I will, but don't ask me to keep pretending I'm too stupid to know what's going on. Look at you. You look awful.”

Alexandra blinked at her roommate, feeling flustered and confused. "Anna, what are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Max!" Anna shouted, making both Alexandra and Charlie jump. "The two of you keep going off... wherever, and half the time you come back with bruises! Why, Alex? Why do you let him do that?" She looked close to tears.

Alexandra stared at her friend. "Max isn't – I mean, you have it all wrong, Anna. He –" Then realization sank in. Her eyes widened and she bolted to her feet. "Oh my God! You think Max and I –? Are you out of your mind?"

"Well, what should I think?" Anna cried. "You started out hating him and he treated you like crap, just like me, and then suddenly you're following him around like a puppy and he's always putting his hands on you..."

Alexandra was pacing their room in a circle, holding her hands up to the sides of her head, grimacing. "Anna..." she groaned. She whirled around and sat down abruptly in front of the other girl, perched on the edge of her bed. She leaned forward and grabbed Anna's hands.

"Max and I are not a couple!" she said. "He's my brother!"

Anna's eyes went wide. She stared at Alexandra speechlessly.

Alexandra sagged a little, feeling drained, as if all the tension had finally been let out of her. "Abraham Thorn is his father," she said. "He didn't tell me until a few weeks ago. He was trying to keep it quiet because not everyone knows, like they do about me, and I guess he didn't want people figuring out we're related, and... oh, it's a long story, Anna! I'm really sorry I didn't tell you before. I wanted to, I really did. But it wasn't just my secret to tell. And those bruises are from dueling practice. Max hasn't been beating me up or bullying me. I know he can be kind of a jerk –" Her face clouded over, as she thought about what had just happened that night. 'Jerk' was an understatement. "He can be really nasty, sometimes. But he's not... I don't know."

Alexandra wasn't sure herself how she felt about Maximilian now. Her thoughts were muddled, but getting the truth out was a relief. Anna was just listening to her quietly, and however she reacted, Alexandra was glad she was no longer keeping secrets from her best friend.

"Are you angry at me?" she asked.

Anna shook her head. Her eyes were still wide.

"I was going to tell you eventually. I just haven't been sure how, and I'm still getting to know Max, and it's just been really confusing."

Anna nodded.

"Would you say something?"

"It sort of makes sense, now," Anna mused.

Alexandra frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Max being kind of a jerk," she said wryly. "So what else do you have in common?"

Alexandra blinked at her, then snorted and gave Anna a shove. Anna shoved her back.

"I can't believe you thought I was... you know. With a junior! Do you think I'm a brainless bimbo like Darla?"

They heard a strangled sound from the other side of the bathroom door, and both of them stared at each other, mouths open. Alexandra pointed her wand at the door and said, "Alohomora!" The door flew open, and Darla stumbled forward and fell onto the floor.

"Brainless bimbo?" she sputtered, with all the indignation she could manage while lying on the ground at Alexandra's feet.

"Yeah," Alexandra said. "And nosy, busybody sneak, too!"

The other girl clambered to her feet, glaring at Alexandra.

"I should have known there was no way any boy would actually be interested in you!" Darla sneered.

Alexandra shook her head. "What's it to you, Darla? What is your problem, anyway?"

Darla sniffed, and brushed herself off.

"Look, don't tell anyone about Max, okay?" Alexandra tried to sound conciliatory. "It's his business, and mine, not anyone else's."

Darla tossed her head. "You should be careful, Alexandra. I think I know a little more about what your brother is capable of than you do."

Alexandra narrowed her eyes. "I don't think so. But I know what I'm capable of if you go blabbing your fat mouth."

Darla gasped, and took a step back. "Who do you think you're threatening? Have you forgotten what I've been learning?"

"How to pretend to cast Unforgivables?" Alexandra scoffed. Her expression darkened, and she raised her wand to level it at Darla's face. "Before you ever even think of cursing me again," she said slowly, "you'd better make sure it will work. Because I promise, I won't say anything I don't mean."

Darla's face turned white. She stammered, and backed away wordlessly, as all her bravado evaporated.

Alexandra slammed the bathroom door, and turned to look at Anna, who had gone pale.

"I didn't mean —" Alexandra sighed. "She just made me so mad!"

"Yeah," Anna said quietly.

"Anna, you know I wouldn't actually hurt her."

Anna nodded. "But sometimes..." She bit her lip.

“Sometimes what?”

Anna looked down. “Sometimes, you can be pretty scary, Alex.”

I guess that's something else Max and I have in common, Alexandra thought.

A Walk in the Woods

Alexandra didn't sleep well that night. Her nightmares about being tortured with the Cruciatus Curse made her groan and thrash around in her bed, and this time, it was her brother standing over her, yelling, "Crucio!"

It wasn't a good start to the day, and in Alchemy class, almost as if he could sense Alexandra's low spirits, Mr. Grue nitpicked her even more mercilessly than usual.

"Do not hack your potatoes up like you are making Muggle food, Miss Quick!" he bellowed, as she sliced away the leaves and eyes which would be used in their Andean Climbing Draught, and discarded the rest. "We are not frying Frenchmen in this class!"

She and David both started snickering, which was a mistake. Mr. Grue gave them detention, and to the delight of their classmates, told everyone else to leave their cauldrons unscrubbed on their desks. David and Alexandra were made to return to the Alchemy classroom after the last period of the day, and spent the afternoon scrubbing their classmates' cauldrons.

"So is it true you're dating Maximilian King?" David asked, as he tried to remove the charred remains of a Peruvian potato that Lydia Ragland had baked to the bottom of her cauldron.

"No!" Alexandra wrinkled her nose as she scrubbed Darla's cauldron, which was covered with sticky, hard-to-remove ooze. She didn't think it was anything that had even been part of their lesson that day. "Are you crazy? He's sixteen!"

"Scourgify!" David said, sticking his wand into Lydia's cauldron. He looked up at Alexandra. "You spend a lot of time with him."

"What business is it of yours? What, are you jealous?"

David laughed. "You're dreaming! You think I'm into skinny white girls? No way!"

"Wow, that's a relief," she retorted. "Since I'm not into nerdy short guys!"

David sputtered. "You're not taller than me!"

"Yes, I am."

"You are not!" David scowled, and then his eyes twinkled. "But King is pretty tall."

Alexandra scowled back. "I'm not dating anyone, you idiot! Especially not Max!"

"Max,' huh?" he replied, with a smug grin.

Alexandra flushed, which made her even more furious, because she knew that would be misinterpreted "So who are you into?" she countered. "If you don't like skinny white girls, I guess you'd prefer Angelique!"

David flushed, and mumbled something unintelligible as he suddenly became very preoccupied with the bottom of Ebenezer Smith's cauldron. Alexandra raised her eyebrows. She refrained from pursuing the point, though; not so much out of consideration for David, but because she preferred moving the topic away from dating altogether. The fact that even her own friends believed she was dating an older boy, when she didn't have any interest in dating any boys, annoyed her more than her reputation for being a Dark wizard's daughter ever had.

They finished up with the Pritchards' cauldrons, which Constance and Forbearance had considerably cleaned themselves and thus required no more than a quick polish. Mr. Grue finally came back into the room, inspected the cauldrons, and grudgingly dismissed them. When the two seventh graders exited the Alchemy classroom, they found Maximilian waiting in the hallway.

"You've got stains on your sleeves, Quick," said the Mage-Corporal.

"I've been cleaning cauldrons," she replied sullenly.

“So I heard. Disrespectful to teachers in class, and poor maintenance of your uniform.”

“Yeah, I'll see you later, Alex,” said David. He gave Maximilian a smirk. “Don't discipline her too hard, huh?”

The Stormcrow frowned at the younger boy as he walked away, then turned back to Alexandra. “Can we talk?”

She looked away, biting her lip.

“Please?” he added, lowering his voice.

After a moment, she nodded, reluctantly, and began walking down the hallway with him.

“That wasn't funny!” she muttered.

He smiled. “Well, you shouldn't disrespect your teachers.”

“Did you know people think I'm dating you?” she whispered.

He ran a hand through his hair, and looked uncomfortable. “Actually, that's why I was late last night. Colonel Shirliffe was counseling me.”

“Counseling?”

“About my 'extremely inappropriate' relationship with a younger witch.”

Alexandra's eyes widened. “Ms. Shirliffe thought we're a couple?”

Maximilian looked around, reached inside his jacket, and muttered, “Muffliato.” Then he spoke in a more normal tone of voice, as he pushed his wand back into its sheath. “Apparently Dean Grimm didn't tell her about my father.” He looked down at her seriously. “I had to tell her that you're my sister. She was quite relieved.”

“Oh.” Alexandra frowned, and looked away.

“Does that bother you?”

She shook her head, then said, “I had to tell Anna.”

Maximilian sighed. “I figured you would eventually.”

“She thought that you're my boyfriend and that you've been beating me up.”

He snorted. “Chu has a depraved imagination.”

“Darla knows, too,” she said.

There was a long silence.

“She was listening at the door when I told Anna,” Alexandra went on, still looking away.

“Well,” Maximilian said finally. “That's unfortunate.”

Alexandra continued to frown, and still didn't look at his face, until she felt his hand on her shoulder. She stopped walking and pulled away, but looked at him at last. His expression was concerned; completely unlike the snarling mask of rage she'd seen last night.

“Touching me like that is why people think we're a couple,” she whispered, glancing around. She remembered belatedly that she didn't have to whisper, thanks to Maximilian's spell, but there were a few other students in the hall, and some were looking at the uniformed older boy and younger girl.

“You're right,” he said, dropping his hand. “I'm sorry. I hadn't considered how your reputation might be affected, by people misunderstanding our relationship.” He took a deep breath. “If you want to tell everyone, I'm prepared.”

She studied his face, then looked away.

“Alexandra?”

She didn't answer.

"You are angry at me."

"What you did to Larry," she said quietly. "That was terrible. I can't believe you did that."

He was silent a moment, then answered, "What he did to you was unforgivable."

"No, using an Unforgivable Curse is unforgivable!" Alexandra snapped, and then lowered her voice, looking around again. "How could you do that to someone after seeing... seeing what it does? I wouldn't do that to anyone, not even Larry!"

He reached a hand out again, and she turned away from him and walked rapidly down the corridor.

"Alex!" he called, and caught up to her in two steps. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm really sorry!"

"Tell Larry you're sorry." She remembered a phrase she'd heard on TV: "You have anger management issues."

"I have what?" he replied, confused.

Alexandra shook her head and kept walking.

"Do you really want me to apologize to that gnoll?"

She stopped and turned to face him again. "If I said yes, would you?"

Maximilian's gaze was inscrutable as he looked down at her. Then he answered, very slowly, "If that's really what you want."

She sighed and closed her eyes. He sounded sincere, but she couldn't forget the sight of him, face twisted in fury, as he kicked Larry repeatedly, and Crucioed him without mercy.

“Promise you won't ever do anything like that again.”

“I'll do whatever I have to to protect you.”

Her eyes snapped open and she glared at him. “You didn't have to do that!” she hissed. “And I've gone my whole life without an older brother to 'protect' me!”

“All of twelve years, yes.” Maximilian smiled, in that infuriating way of his. “But you have one now.” He stopped smiling and looked more serious. “Perhaps I did lose control a little last night.”

“A little?” she repeated, in disbelief.

“All right,” he admitted, “I may have gone too far.”

She snorted and rolled her eyes.

“Are you determined to stay angry at me?”

“You're really a jerk, you know that?”

“So you've told me. Repeatedly.” The small, bemused smile was back. “Julia calls me –”

“A blaggard, yeah, whatever that means.”

“You two would get along.”

She shook her head. “What are we going to do about Darla?”

“I don't think we can do anything. I'll talk to her, but I'm not going to beg, or threaten. If she decides to be spiteful...” He frowned. “Frankly, until I met you, I dreaded letting the world know who my father is. Mother has tried to shield Julia and me, seeing what happened to Father's other children. But you seem to handle it well.”

Alexandra shrugged. “No one in the Muggle world knows who Abraham Thorn is.”

“But you're part of the wizarding world now,” he said. “And part of our family.”

He smiled as she stared at him.

“I'd like to meet your – I mean, our – sister someday,” she said, finally.

Her brother nodded. “I'd like that too, and I know she would as well. It will happen, I promise.”

Nothing happened as a result of their encounter with the freshmen boys – none of them reported the incident. When Alexandra saw them around school, Ethan and Wade avoided her gaze, and even turned around to walk down the hall in the opposite direction. They were apparently taking Maximilian's warning very seriously. Larry, who had been the one actually tortured, didn't flee from her presence, but his expression when he looked in her direction was neither angry nor fearful – it was dark and brooding and hard to decipher. She found it a little disturbing, but she had no wish to antagonize him, and she couldn't quite bring herself to go ask him if he was all right. And she knew it was unnecessary; of course he was all right. After all, she was all right, she told herself. They'd both survived the Cruciatus Curse, and it wasn't like they'd been afflicted with lasting injuries.

Alexandra didn't get to see Maximilian much outside of JROC during the final week of classes. Everyone was studying for their SPAWNs, as well as preparing their end-of-semester projects. For their Muggle Studies class, Constance and Forbearance had to demonstrate an example of Muggle entertainment, and were turning Delta Kappa Kappa Tau hall into a bowling alley in the evenings to practice, using their wands to keep the ball from crashing into walls or students.

Alexandra and Anna spent a lot of time in the library, with Anna writing copious notes on potion formulas and elemental weights for their Alchemy midterm, and Alexandra doing research for a two-foot scroll on the Wizards' Congress that was due in her Wizarding Social Studies class. It was terribly dull, and Anna frequently had to poke her to keep her from falling asleep. She did find it interesting that every book in the library had blanked out the name of the representative from Roanoke Territory who'd been elected in 1982.

Almost as if they could erase her father from history by removing his name from books. She wondered if Bran and Poe were the ones who'd been assigned that task. She made sure to deliberately write Abraham Thorn's name all over her essay – she imagined Mrs. Middle would have a fit.

The final JROC drill of the semester was on a cold winter afternoon, the day before their SPAWNs. Ms. Shirtliffe had everyone dress in formal uniforms, and Sarah Wittencroft, a reporter and photographer for the school paper, was there to take pictures as they marched, flew in precise formations on their brooms, and performed one more set of wand drills. Even Anna gave it her best effort – mostly because she knew it was the last time she'd have to do it.

Afterwards, Alexandra saw Sarah talking to Maximilian, giggling flirtatiously as she asked to take a few more pictures of him and Martin. Alexandra rolled her eyes, and was about to leave with Anna – who was almost jumping up and down in her eagerness to go back to their room and remove her hated uniform for the last time – when Maximilian called, “Alexandra!”

Alexandra turned around, startled. Her brother never called her anything but “Quick!” in public. Most everyone else looked startled, too. Ms. Shirtliffe was watching, with her arms folded and her eyebrows raised.

Alexandra walked over to him, and asked, with excessive politeness, “Yes, Mage-Corporal King?”

She was shocked when Maximilian reached out and pulled her close to him, turning her around to face Sarah, with his hands on her shoulders.

“I'm about to give Miss Wittencroft a scoop,” he said. Then he leaned forward, and whispered in Alexandra's ear, “If it's all right with you?”

Alexandra licked her lips nervously, staring at the older girl, who had a camera in one hand, a Quote-Quill in the other, and an odd expression on her face.

"A little late to ask me now, isn't it?" she muttered. She turned her head to look up at Maximilian. He was looking down at her very seriously.

"Okay." She nodded.

"Apparently, some rumors have been spreading around the school, about me and Alexandra," Maximilian said to the school reporter.

Sarah blushed. "Oh, the Charmbridge Cheerer doesn't print gossip!" she stammered. "We're a newspaper!"

"Well, maybe you'll find this newsworthy enough to print," Maximilian told her. "Alexandra is my sister." And as Sarah gaped at him, he drew himself up proudly, and said, "You can print my birth name in the captions for my photos: Maximilian Thorn."

Alexandra kept her face impassive, as Sarah gasped and then fumbled with her camera and nearly dropped her Quote-Quill. She took a picture of Alexandra with her brother, and then a few more pictures of Maximilian with his friends. Beatrice and Martin both winked at Alexandra, as they stood next to him. Maximilian's face was impassive too – but she thought she saw a trace of gratitude, as his two friends put their arms around his shoulders. And then they waved her over, and she felt embarrassed, annoyed, and secretly pleased as the three Stormcrows pushed her back and forth and ruffled her hair and teased her, as Sarah took more pictures.

"That's probably going to make the Chicago Wizard Times, not just the Charmbridge Cheerer," Ms. Shirliffe told them, after Sarah had left, with her pictures and her quotes. "Two children of Abraham Thorn at Charmbridge Academy." She looked at Alexandra and Maximilian, and smiled slightly. "I'm glad you're not keeping it a secret anymore."

"So am I," Maximilian replied. "I'm tired of living in fear of my father's reputation. Alexandra helped me overcome that."

Alexandra looked down, as her face felt inexplicably warm.

“Quick is an exceptional young witch in a lot of ways,” said Shirliffe. “I hope you'll persuade her to stay in JROC next semester.” As Alexandra looked up, startled, the teacher nodded. “Dismissed.”

They both saluted her, and then looked at each other as Shirliffe walked away.

“Are you going to sign up for JROC next semester?” Maximilian asked.

Alexandra shrugged uncomfortably. “I dunno.”

He nodded. “I'm not going to try to persuade you. But, I'd like you to meet me outside tomorrow night.”

She blinked. “Like last time?” She never had asked him why he'd wanted to meet her outside that night in the first place.

“Hopefully not like last time.” He shook his head. “Send your familiar out to find me first, and lead you to me.”

She frowned. “What for?”

“I want to show you something. In the woods.”

“You want me to walk with you into the woods, alone at night,” she said slowly. “To see something you won't tell me about beforehand.”

His expression was somber. His dark eyes reflected nothing back. He seemed to understand exactly what she was thinking. There were so many reasons for her to think this was a bad idea.

“Nothing will happen to you,” he said, very seriously. “You'll be with me.”

She looked up at him, her own face unreadable.

“Do you trust me, Alexandra?” he asked quietly.

And though what went through her head were all the times she'd seen Max's face contort with rage, his expression as he cast the Cruciatus Curse on Larry, and Anna's voice warning her that she was being foolish again, she nodded.

"Yes," she replied.

He smiled.

Anna was sick with worry the next morning at breakfast, and Alexandra didn't dare mention what she'd be doing that night – her roommate was stressed out enough about their SPAWNs.

"You've been doing nothing but study for the last few weeks, Anna," Alexandra sighed. "And you always score near the top."

"But this is the seventh grade-level SPAWN!" Anna said anxiously. "It's a lot harder than the sixth grade-level SPAWN!"

"Yeah, and next year we'll have the eighth grade-level SPAWN," Alexandra replied, spreading butter and jam on her toast. "That'll be even harder, right?"

From Anna's queasy expression, Alexandra thought maybe she shouldn't have pointed that out. "You'll do fine," she reassured her, munching her toast. "Eat something."

As usual, the worst part of the Standardized Practical Assessment of Wizarding kNowledge for Alexandra was the Alchemy section, overseen by Mr. Grue. She did fairly well on the written portion, but her Warming Potion burned Mr. Grue's tongue, and he roared and spat it out. Then he made her drink it, so the inside of her mouth was burned as well, and then he made her brew a Blister Tincture, while he used his own to treat his own tongue.

That's one 'Excellent' I won't be getting, she thought bitterly. Not that she thought Mr. Grue would ever give her a good score.

On either side of her, Constance and Forbearance (whom Mr. Grue had separated for the SPAWN test) were both looking quite worried

as they tried to brew their own potions perfectly. They'd spoken of needing at least Excellent scores in Alchemy and Herbology to qualify for Advanced Alchemy I next year, which was a prerequisite for eventually taking classes in Wandcraft by the time they were in eleventh grade. Alexandra envied the Pritchards their ability to plan out what they wanted to study four years ahead of time; she still didn't know what she wanted to do next semester.

Her final practical test of the day was in Basic Magical Defense, administered, as usual, by Ms. Shirliffe. Shirliffe wasn't in her uniform, but looked no less formidable in teacher's robes, when Alexandra stepped into her classroom.

"So, Quick. It's been quite a semester, hasn't it?"

Alexandra nodded. "No one's tried to kill me, though. Unless you count Darla."

Ms. Shirliffe smiled wryly. "I'm glad you've maintained your sense of humor." She drew her wand. "Well, after a semester of JROC drills, and your extracurricular activities with your brother – oh yes, I know about those – I expect you must be feeling a little more confident than last time?"

Alexandra narrowed her eyes, but she assumed Ms. Shirliffe was talking about her dueling practice – she was sure the teacher couldn't know that she and Maximilian had been both involved in the Mors Mortis Society.

"Yes, ma'am," she said, drawing her own wand.

They exchanged hexes for a full minute. Alexandra was unable to do anything to Ms. Shirliffe, though she thought she was pressing her more strongly than she had last year. Then the older witch began throwing counter-curses at her. Alexandra tried to deflect them, but first her feet were rooted to the floor, and then Shirliffe cast a Stinging Spell that made Alexandra's face feel like it was on fire, and then a Balloon-Hands Curse made her fingers swell up until she could no longer hold her wand, and it tumbled out of her hand.

"You're still much better at attacking than defending," observed the teacher.

"If you curse someone before they can curse you, you don't need to defend yourself," Alexandra countered.

"A good strategy if you're facing a Killing Curse... or other Unforgivables," said Shirliffe, with a grim expression. "But striking first and striking harder won't win in every situation. Learn to defend yourself, Quick. Or you'll never be able to defend anyone else."

Alexandra wasn't certain just what lesson Ms. Shirliffe was trying to teach her. She left her Basic Magical Defense practical feeling disgruntled, while she rubbed her face with her still-swollen hands.

Everyone was in a celebratory mood that night at dinner, though. Regardless of how they thought they'd done on their SPAWNs, they were done with tests until next semester. Constance and Forbearance wanted to go bowling; they suggested using the gymnasium, since Ms. Gale had forbidden them to send any more bowling balls rolling down school corridors. David agreed, to Alexandra's surprise, and so she and Anna agreed to go, too.

Alexandra brought her winter coat, planning to meet Maximilian afterwards, and she pulled Anna aside when they finished bowling and everyone else was returning to their dorms.

"Can you go back to our room and open the window so Charlie can get out?" she asked.

Anna stared at her, with an all-too-familiar look of dismay.

"Max wants to show me something," Alexandra said. "I don't know what it is, but I'm telling you so you won't worry and you won't think I'm keeping secrets from you."

"Oh, right, no reason for me to worry at all," Anna replied.

"Anna, you worry about everything." Alexandra gave her friend a hug. "I'll be fine with Max."

Anna shook her head. "All right," she sighed. "I'll let Charlie out." She gave Alexandra one more worried look, before heading upstairs.

Alexandra put on her coat and stood just outside the gym, rubbing her hands together in the cold. Five minutes later, Charlie fluttered out of the darkness and landed on her shoulder.

"Alexandra," the raven greeted her.

Alexandra smiled at her familiar. "Hi, Charlie." She pet the bird's head, then said, "Will you go find Maximilian for me, please?"

The raven tilted its head, and seemed to give her a dubious look before taking off.

It was a dark, cold, December night. Alexandra shivered as she looked across the lawns at the deep forest beyond. She was glad she hadn't told Anna she was going into the woods.

Charlie returned only a couple of minutes later, and cawed at her from overhead. Alexandra began walking as the raven led her around Charmbridge's walls, and she found Maximilian by the fire pit, standing tall and square with his hands in his pockets. He wore a long cloak over his leather jacket.

"So where are we going?" she asked.

"Into the woods," Maximilian replied. He gestured with his hand, towards the trees on the other side of the Quodpot field.

As they walked towards the forest, Charlie settled on her shoulder. "Why so mysterious?" she demanded.

"You'll see."

"You know I hate it when people know stuff and don't tell me."

"I know." She was sure he was smiling, in the darkness. "You're going to call me a jerk again, aren't you?"

“Or a blaggard.”

He chuckled, which wasn't something he did often. They reached the edge of the woods, and heard rustling and clucking in the branches above. Alexandra knew that thousands of crows were roosting here for the winter. Charlie puffed up and made a warning, clacking sound.

“Shh. We're fine, Charlie,” she admonished. “They're just birds.”

Charlie squawked indignantly.

They walked silently for a while. The lights of the academy faded behind them, and Alexandra thought about all of her previous excursions into the woods – none of which had ended well.

“Max?” she asked.

“Yes?”

“Have you ever been Crucioed?”

He slowed to a halt, and turned towards her.

“Yes,” he replied, after a moment. She looked at him in surprise. There was a nearly full moon overhead, and some of its light shone on their faces.

He put a hand on her shoulder, and they resumed walking, a little more slowly.

“At BMI,” he told her, “everyone has to undergo the Cruciatus Curse in their senior year. We don't just have a final SPAWN; we have what's called the Final Trials. A week spent up in the Acadian forests or down in the Everglades, or somewhere else inhospitable, a few encounters with Manticores or wild Hippogriffs or some other dangerous beasts, and of course, lots of combat exercises. It's just a sample of the training you get if you join the Regimental Officer Corps after you graduate. And part of it is experiencing what the Cruciatus Curse is like.”

That sounded both exciting and horrible to Alexandra. "But you're not a senior."

"Right, but we all know we'll have to go through it. No one wants to be the one who wets himself when it's his turn to go under the wand. So, there are always a few students who learn how to do it, and we practice on each other, trying to prepare ourselves."

"You... Crucio each other?" Alexandra asked, appalled.

"To cast an effective Cruciatus Curse, you have to really mean it," Maximilian said slowly. "You have to really want to cause pain. Since we're usually practicing with our friends... well, it's only a little taste of the real thing."

Alexandra thought about that, as they continued walking deeper into the woods. Larry had screamed like he was getting more than a little taste. She shivered, and Maximilian must have felt that, through his gloved hand on her shoulder.

"We brag about who can go the longest without making a sound," he said quietly. "But it's not like the real thing. And for our Final Trials, it's only a few seconds." And after another long pause, he added, "Not as long as what you endured."

His hand slid across her back, until his arm was around her shoulders and he was walking while holding her close to him, and it was such a strange and unfamiliar thing that she didn't know what to make of it, except that she had no urge to pull away. She was walking deeper into the dense, wild woods with a boy she barely knew, who claimed to be her brother, but who had a dark and dangerous side she didn't understand. And she wasn't afraid.

Charlie took off, making a loud crying sound in the darkness.

"Charlie?" she called out. "What's wrong?"

Maximilian slowed down. "I think..."

“What?”

He removed his arm from around her shoulders, and looked around. In the pale moonlight, she saw there was a small clearing ahead, where a very large tree had fallen, ages ago, and was now lying like a great dark barricade in their path. They heard a raven's loud screech, and Alexandra saw a black shadow moving atop the fallen tree trunk.

“Here.” He placed his hand in the small of her back, and exerted gentle pressure, without pushing her. “Go on,” he said softly. “This is the place.”

She looked at him questioningly.

“I'll be right here,” he promised. “It will be all right. Trust me.”

She swallowed. “I trust you, Max,” she said quietly. And she walked forward, into the clearing.

The dead tree trunk was even larger up close. It was huge. The top of it was high above her head, and she could barely see the raven sitting up there, until it leaned over to look down at her.

It wasn't Charlie.

“I recognize you,” she whispered.

“Alexandra,” croaked the raven, and it spread its wings and glided down from the tree trunk towards her. Its wingspread was immense – she guessed it was nearly twice Charlie's size. For a moment she thought it meant to land on her shoulder, and then it swooped by her head and passed her.

“She recognizes you, too,” said a deep voice behind her.

Alexandra turned around slowly.

The man standing there, at the edge of the clearing, was taller than Maximilian, and wore a long dark cloak that covered him completely, except for his head and one arm, which was now extended for the

enormous raven to perch on. His dark beard and mustache were the same as in the photographs she had seen. Indeed, he looked very much like the picture she'd had in a locket that she had found and lost last year, among her mother's old keepsakes – perhaps just a little older.

Abraham Thorn raised his arm, and made a soft clucking sound with his tongue. The raven squawked and took off, flapping up to a tree branch overhead, where it settled and looked down on both of them. He lowered his arm and turned to her again.

“Hello, Alexandra,” said her father. He smiled. “I have been waiting so very long for this moment.”

Abraham Thorn

Alexandra studied her father, in the moonlight. The moon was shining more brightly on her than on him; she was standing away from the trees that encircled the small clearing, while he was still in the shadows. It allowed him to see her face quite clearly, while she could only see half of his. She could see his eyes twinkling, though, and the pleasure in his voice seemed genuine.

He held his arms out, as if he wanted to embrace her, but she stood where she was, unmoving.

"You've got a lot of explaining to do," she said, "before you get to give me a hug, or expect me to call you 'Dad'."

He hesitated a moment, then let his arms fall to his sides. If he was disappointed, his face didn't show it. "So I do," he replied, in a calm voice. He waved a wand – she hadn't even noticed him drawing it – and suddenly a blue ball of light appeared in mid-air, a couple of yards from her. She could feel heat radiating from it from where she was standing, though it didn't appear to be producing flames. He waved his wand again, and conjured a couple of comfortable chairs, right next to the blue light.

"Let us sit and be comfortable," Abraham Thorn said, "and you may put your questions to me." He walked to the nearest chair and took a seat. When Alexandra hesitated, he gestured at the other chair. "Please, my dear."

She walked slowly over to the chair, and sat down in it, feeling as if everything were a bit surreal. She and her father, sitting in cushioned armchairs, warmed by a magical blue fireball, in the middle of the forest. It was nice not to be standing there in the cold, though.

"Max," she said, as she suddenly remembered that he was standing out there in the cold. She looked around.

Her father waved his hand. "Maximilian will be fine. Don't worry about him, Alexandra. He'll wait until we're done. He knows this time is mine and yours."

“Charlie?”

In answer, she heard a voice call, “Alexandra!” She looked at the branch where Abraham Thorn's raven was sitting, and saw her own familiar sitting on the same branch, a few feet away.

“There is Charlie, with Hagar. They'll wait for us, too.” Her father smiled.

She studied him a little more closely, now that the blue light was illuminating him better. He was a handsome man, with thick dark hair covering his ears and the back of his neck, a full, dark beard and mustache, and eyes that were even darker than Maximilian's. Alexandra knew, from reading Abraham Thorn's biographies, that he was nearly sixty, but he didn't look nearly that old. He had only a few creases in his face, and he seemed strong and sure when he moved.

“You said you wanted to see me again so badly,” she said to him at last. “Why now? Why not before?”

“You know that Elias Hucksteen and his minions are watching you,” her father replied. “They have been, since you were born. I couldn't simply appear at your house to have a chat.”

“But you've managed to talk to your other children.” Her voice remained calm, but an accusing tone was creeping into it. “You know the Governor-General is watching me now, but you're here. So you must have some way to keep his Special Inquisitors from knowing. You're saying there's no way you could have arranged a meeting like this in the last twelve years?”

He shook his head. “You're right, I could have. But what would I have told you before now, Alexandra? That your father is a wizard?”

“I've been doing magic since I was little,” she replied. “I'm sure you could have convinced me.”

He chuckled. “Yes, surely. But explaining Hucksteen, and the Confederation, and why I couldn't be a regular part of your life? How

would I have explained that to you, when you were ten? Or eight? Or six?"

Alexandra frowned. "Maybe I wouldn't have understood everything, but you still could have been there. You could have let me know you were alive and that you hadn't just abandoned Mom and me." She narrowed her eyes at him. "Or were you worried that anything you might have told me would help the Governor-General catch you, since you made me your Secret-Keeper? I guess I was more useful to you not knowing anything."

Abraham Thorn's gaze was steady and unflinching, and Alexandra had to fight, every second she held it, not to look away. She could sense the power and steely will in her father's eyes, and began to understand how it was that he was considered such a formidable man, even without seeing any impressive displays of magic.

"I understand your bitterness, Alexandra," he said gently. "I don't hold it against you."

"Oh, that's good," she cut in, and he closed his mouth abruptly at the interruption. For a moment there was a tiny flash of irritation in his eyes, but he let her keep speaking. "I'm glad you don't hold it against me that you abandoned Mom and me and left me to find out everything about you all by myself! I mean, I just found out last month that I have a brother, and sisters!"

He was silent a moment, then spoke again, very softly. "You're right, my child. You're right to be angry. You have not been treated fairly. I accept your rebuke. Would you like to go on, or would you like me to attempt to explain myself?"

She frowned, and slumped a little in her seat. Her father's soft-spokenness made her feel like a child throwing a temper tantrum. She had envisioned an angry, shouting confrontation when she finally met her father, and now she didn't even know what she wanted to say to him.

"Go ahead," she muttered.

He clasped his hands, and leaned forward.

“You were born when the hunt for us was most intense. Inquisitors and Hit-Wizards were almost literally breathing down our necks. We – my allies and I – expected to be captured or killed at any moment. I could hardly expose you to that, my child, nor did I want you raised within the Confederation. It wasn't safe for you or for Claudia. So I sent you both away, to hide in the Muggle world. And I did cast a Fidelius Charm to make you the Secret-Keeper for the Thorn Circle, at the same time that I bound all of us in a Circle of Protection to safeguard your life.

“You grew up not knowing who your father was, and for that I am sorry. But understand, it was safer that way, for the Inquisitors to believe you had been abandoned and forgotten by me, for you and Claudia to be left in peace. I did check on you, as often as I could, and saw that you were healthy and happy.”

“How do you know I was happy?” she asked sullenly.

He raised his eyebrows. “Weren't you? Have you not been well cared for? Your stepfather... Mr. Green. He has been good to you and Claudia, hasn't he? He hasn't mistreated you?” An edge crept into his voice, and Alexandra saw something a little less kindly in his eyes.

“Archie's all right,” she muttered. “But if you have to ask, then you didn't really know, did you?”

“I judged based on what I saw.” His eyes shone as he said softly, “I saw a clever, adventurous little girl who is now becoming a strong, intelligent young woman. You are everything I could hope for in a daughter, Alexandra. Of course I am proud of all my children. Every one of you is a joy and a treasure, and I hold you all close in my heart. But you, my dear child, are my youngest, my baby, and unlike all my other children, you had to grow up among Muggles, ignorant of your birthright. That makes you special.”

Alexandra screwed her face up in a scowl. She wanted to stay angry at her father. She had twelve years worth of unanswered questions, and now she'd had several months to build up her anger and

resentment, and here he was, the most feared wizard in the Confederation, coming to her with a kindly manner and soft words, calling her his “baby.” She felt her anger melting, slipping away, even as she tried to hold onto it. But she wasn't prepared to forgive him, or soften her heart. Not yet.

“It wasn't easy for Mom, you know,” she told him. “Being a single mother. Nursing school isn't easy, especially when you have a baby.”

Her father nodded. “I would never have allowed my daughter to suffer,” he replied. “I told you, Alexandra, I have been watching over you, and I would have provided for you both.”

“Like you provide for all your other kids?”

He leaned slowly back in his chair. “All of my children are provided for. My ex-wives all come from wealthy wizarding families. They would not go without, even if I were not looking after them.”

“That's convenient,” Alexandra muttered.

She knew she was just being bitter and sulky now. She could tell by the way her father sat in his chair and looked at her, without replying, that she was probably testing his patience. Archie would have gotten angry at her, if she spoke to him like that, and she suspected her father was putting up with it only because he wanted her to stop being angry at him. But she had good reason to be angry at him!

“Is it true you've been married and divorced three times?” she asked.

He sighed. “I have been many things, Alexandra. A good husband isn't one of them. Do you really want to know about the wives I had before I met your mother? They were all good women. I blame them for nothing.”

She frowned. He waited.

“Why didn't you marry my mother? Why did you leave her? How did you wind up having a baby with a Muggle, if the mothers of all your other children are witches? Did she know you're a wizard?”

He smiled. "Now we're getting closer to the matters that truly concern you," he said. "I didn't marry your mother because I was in the process of fomenting rebellion. I left her because I failed. How you came to be – well, I did love your mother very much, and still do."

"You fell in love with a Muggle who was like half your age?"

His smile became a little tighter. "Stranger things have happened, my dear."

"How did you meet?"

"Alexandra." He leaned forward. "These are entirely reasonable questions. But surely you've asked Claudia these things?"

"She's never told me anything," Alexandra complained. "I've asked about you all my life, and she's always refused to tell me anything about my father."

"I see." He pressed his lips together thoughtfully.

"You must have really hurt her or something," she said, watching him carefully. His eyes fixed on her, and she felt her mouth go dry, but she resisted the impulse to shrink back in her chair.

"I suppose Claudia has had a rather more difficult life than I would have chosen for her," he replied. "And she must feel abandoned, as you do. I am truly sorry about that."

"She was Obliviated," Alexandra muttered, through clenched teeth. "The Office of Special Inquisitions interrogated her, right after I was born, and then they Obliviated her so she wouldn't remember it."

"I am not surprised." His tone was very flat.

"Is that why she won't tell me anything? Because they took all her memories of you? Did you break Confederation law by getting a Muggle woman pregnant?"

Thorn almost smiled. "No, although there are certainly blood supremacists who would like to make that illegal." He shook his head. "I will answer any questions you have about my actions, Alexandra, but I won't speak for Claudia. I think you need to put some of your questions to her, if you want answers. I doubt very much that they Obliviated all memories of me from her mind." His eyes hardened a little. "They would want her to be able to answer questions about me, after all."

"You didn't tell me how you met, or whether she knows you were a wizard."

He rested his elbows on the arms of the chair he'd conjured, pressed his fingers together, and regarded her silently for a moment. She could hear a slight breeze rustling through the leaves in the forest, and owls and other nocturnal creatures making noises all around them. Normally it would be a rather spooky setting, especially since she knew there were things in this forest besides owls and foxes. But she doubted any beast, magical or otherwise, would approach two people sitting in front of a blazing blue ball of light. And if they did, Charlie and Hagar would give warning.

"What Claudia knows or does not know," he responded at last, "is for her to tell you."

"I thought you said you'd answer all my questions." Frustrated, Alexandra was trying not to sound pouty.

He nodded. "So I shall. But I ask that you speak to her first. She raised you, and lived a difficult life for which I am largely to blame, and I think I owe her the courtesy of letting her speak for herself. Don't you?"

Alexandra frowned and looked at the ground, where her feet were idly kicking leaves and moss around. When he put it like that, it seemed reasonable – except that her mother had never spoken about this at all, and she'd been waiting so long! She was confused.

She looked up at him. "Did you really go to England to meet with Lord Voldemort?"

Behind him, Hagar squawked. Her father looked a little surprised at the sudden change in topic, but he nodded. "Yes, I did."

"To make friends with him?"

"No." He shook his head, and laughed sourly. "Voldemort didn't have friends, or even allies. Only servants. I met him under the pretext of being... interested in his plans. His ambitions extended far beyond Britain, of course, and I wanted to know what his goals were and how likely it was that he would achieve them. I wanted to take his measure, and know just how great a threat he might be to the Confederation."

"The Governor-General said you were a traitor."

"Yes." Thorn's expression darkened. "A nice bit of political maneuvering on his part. I did not meet Voldemort as an official Confederation delegate, but we weren't at war with him, so I violated no laws. Nonetheless..."

"So it was all politics. You going to Britain, you becoming a traitor, and then trying to assassinate the Governor-General?"

"In the end, Alexandra," he said slowly, "everything is politics." He looked at her calmly. "The Confederation is rotten to the core, much as the Ministry of Magic was, even before Voldemort took over. You've only seen a little bit of that. The way the Office of Special Inquisitions interrogates my children, Obliviates people, attempts to impose new and harsher restrictions on wizarding society every year. You're too young to understand –"

"Don't tell me I'm too young to understand!" she snapped. Hagar made a startled cawing sound, and her father narrowed his eyes. For an instant, Alexandra feared she might have finally crossed the line.

"I'm not stupid," she added, in a much quieter voice.

Her father stared at her for several long moments, then smiled thinly. "You most certainly are not. Never imagine for a moment that I think so."

"Then don't treat me like a little kid." She was afraid that her voice sounded exactly like that of an indignant little kid.

"I won't. Do you want to talk more about the Confederation, and Governor-General Hucksteen?"

She frowned.

"Read the papers, listen to the Wizard Wireless news, pay attention to what is happening, but be skeptical of everything you hear," he told her. "You are not stupid, Alexandra. You're very, very bright. I think you'll figure out what's going on, if you try."

"Are you in the Dark Convention?" she asked.

He pressed his fingers together again. "No. But they are allies, after a fashion."

"What do you mean, 'after a fashion'?"

"We share goals and objectives. Most members of the Dark Convention are outcasts with no particular ambition. Some have terrible ambitions, and many, ambitious or not, are simply twisted and perverse. What we share is a hatred of the Confederation. With a common enemy, our interests happen to coincide... sometimes."

"So you make friends with them when it's convenient."

He smiled. "Not only bright, but already becoming cynical." He almost sounded proud. "But that's a reasonable assessment."

"Great. You make friends with bad people so you can get rid of other bad people."

His smile looked a little stretched again. "It's not a perfect world, Alexandra. I wish I only worked with honorable, trustworthy men, but I don't. Revolution requires dirtying your hands."

“Revolution.” This all sounded over her head, suddenly. She had just told him not to treat her like a little kid, but he was talking about politics and revolution, things that didn't seem to concern her, and she didn't want to admit that none of this really seemed as important to her as him being a non-presence in her life for twelve years. “Does that mean you really are an enemy of the Confederation? What do you want to do, start a war, like the American Revolution? Or like Voldemort did in Britain?”

“I am no Voldemort!” Thorn responded angrily, and Alexandra did shrink back in her chair a little. He sucked in a breath, and spoke more quietly. “Voldemort wanted to rule. I would prefer to govern, and I'm even willing to let someone else do the governing. But not this government, not our corrupt, archaic Confederation, and not Elias Hucksteen!”

His words, when he spoke the Governor-General's name, came out as practically a snarl. Alexandra's eyes were wide. She wasn't sure what her father's real motives were, but she realized with dead certainty that his animosity for Governor-General Hucksteen was, in some way, personal. And though it raised a flood of new questions, she thought better of asking them. His eyes were glittering and harsh in the moonlight, before he looked at her and the way she'd suddenly fallen silent, and his face softened.

“I'm sure you've heard many things about me, my child,” he said. “There are countless stories of my villainy. They try to portray me as a Dark Lord. But as you can see –” He spread his hands. “– I am just a man. A wizard, a father...”

“An outlaw.”

He lowered his hands, and smiled. “Yes. That, too.”

“So none of the stories about you using Dark Arts and cursing your enemies are true?”

He stopped smiling, and regarded her very seriously. “Some of them are,” he said evenly. “My enemies have tried to curse me often enough.”

"If you do start a revolution, won't that mean a war, with a lot of people dying?"

"You ask serious questions, Alexandra. I hope you appreciate that I am not trying to pretty things up for you. Yes, although I'd prefer a bloodless coup, avoiding bloodshed is unlikely."

"Then why should I believe that you aren't a bad guy? I've met Governor-General Hucksteen, and he's a big, fat, jerk and I don't trust him one little bit, him or the people working for him. But that doesn't mean I trust you, either. Why can't you just duel him and settle this, instead of starting a war?"

Her father stared at her for a few moments, and then his face broke out into a smile. He tilted his head back and laughed. It would have made Alexandra angry, but she sensed he wasn't mocking her. He was genuinely amused.

"Oh, my dear child," he said at last. "You are your father's daughter! You will not bend easily, and you ask very pertinent, if somewhat naïve, questions. Of course you're old enough to know that things can't possibly be settled that simply." For a moment, she saw a malevolent gleam return to his eyes. "Though I assure you, nothing would please me more than a chance to duel Elias Hucksteen."

She looked down. "Sure. I can see how destroying a corrupt government would be much more important than your children."

His smile faded, and very slowly, he leaned forward and reached for her hands. She didn't resist or pull away as he took them in his, but she didn't look up at him. Even through his gloves, his hands felt like steel, but they curled gently around her fingers.

"Alexandra." He spoke softly. "Nothing is more important to me than my children. I would die for you. I would do anything for you. I am doing what I'm doing for you, for all of you!"

She bit her lip. She could think of a dozen angry retorts. They all sounded petulant in her mind.

"I am not unrealistic," he went on, in that same soft tone. "I never expected that you would suddenly hug me and call me 'Dad,' as you put it, on our first meeting. I would have liked that, very much..." He paused, but Alexandra kept her eyes fixed on his hands, wrapped around hers. "But I did not expect it. All I can hope for is that your heart is not so hardened against me that you won't allow me to try to soften it. I admit I have made mistakes. I deserve your scorn. I hope someday I will be able to earn your forgiveness... and even your affection."

She raised her head, to look into his eyes. He gazed back at her.

"It's going to take more than one visit every twelve years," she said.

He smiled. "Of course."

They sat there for a moment, as owls hooted around them, and Charlie and Hagar cawed back.

"I'm going to ask Mom," she said firmly. "About everything." When she went home for Christmas this year, she told herself, she was absolutely going to confront her mother for once and for all. "And next time I see you, I'll have more questions."

"I have no doubt."

They sat there for a minute longer, and her father seemed content simply holding her hands. She looked around, and mumbled, "Max is probably getting cold."

"You and Maximilian are becoming close?"

She wrinkled her brow a little. "I... don't know. Sometimes he's kind of a jerk. I hated him, before I found out he was my brother."

Thorn looked amused. "It's to be expected that siblings won't always get along. But he's a remarkable young man. I'm very proud of him... as I am of you. He knows I expect him to look after you."

She snorted. "Don't encourage him. He thinks he's supposed to 'protect' me!"

"Good." Her father smiled, and she rolled her eyes.

He rose slowly from his seat, pulling her to her feet as well. He was still gripping her hands in his.

"I am going to give you a hug, now," he stated. Somehow he made it sound like a request, though it wasn't. Alexandra didn't say anything. She didn't hug him back, but she didn't resist, as he put his arms around her and held her.

"Has Maximilian told you about the Mors Mortis Society?" she murmured, with her face half buried in her father's cloak.

He stepped back and looked at her, with his hands still on her shoulders.

"It's a secret Dark Arts club at school," she continued, lowering her voice, even though she knew Maximilian couldn't hear them. "We were both members, but I quit. He didn't, even though he says he doesn't want to do Dark Arts. And they're all really creepy! He's trying to spy on them, and find out about their ties to the Dark Convention. All so..." She suddenly gagged and clutched her throat. It felt like her tongue was swelling up, sealing off her airway.

Her father let go of her, and swiftly pointed his wand. Suddenly she could breathe, and her tongue felt normal again. She gasped.

"Amateurish curse," he scoffed, scornfully.

She gulped. "You got rid of it?"

"Yes." He regarded her calmly. "I know about the Mors Mortis Society, Alexandra. Maximilian told me all about it."

"Make him stop."

Thorn raised an eyebrow, then smiled and shook his head. "Your brother knows what he's doing. Yes, it is dangerous –"

"He's doing it because he thinks he needs to redeem his family name, because of you!" Alexandra's voice rose again.

"I know." The older man remained calm, in the face of Alexandra's burst of anger, and she subsided, feeling like a little girl losing her temper again. "Do you think he would abandon his mission if I told him to? Do you think I should force him to do so – assuming I could?"

She stared at her father, uncertain how to answer.

"He might listen to you," she said. "Obviously you talk."

The wizard didn't miss the bitterness in Alexandra's tone. He sighed.

"We do, but not as often as I would like. And while he fortunately doesn't harbor quite as much anger and resentment towards me as my youngest child, that doesn't mean I can tell him what to do."

She looked down, frowning. Max, she thought, harbored a lot more anger than their father knew.

"You worry about him," he said.

She shrugged.

He squeezed her shoulder. "You are so very precious to me, Alexandra. It pleases me greatly that you and Maximilian are together, now, looking after each other. And we will spend more time together."

She nodded, not really in confirmation, but just to acknowledge what he'd said, while her thoughts stormed about in her head. He sighed, and caressed her cheek before straightening up again.

He waved his wand, and the glowing blue ball of light winked out, and the chairs disappeared. With a shriek, Abraham Thorn's formidable raven glided off the tree branch overhead to land on his shoulder. Alexandra's smaller raven descended silently to land on her shoulder,

looking unusually cowed. She imagined that Hagar might be a little intimidating to Charlie.

“You have a fine choice for a familiar,” Thorn remarked. Hagar clucked agreement, but Alexandra merely nodded, with a small smile, and Charlie offered only a head tilt in response.

The two of them walked slowly out of the clearing, and found Maximilian standing by a tree, some distance away, rolling his wand back and forth in his hands. He didn't appear to be trying to warm himself magically; gusts of vapor appeared around his mouth and nose as he breathed.

“Thank you for bringing your sister to me, Maximilian,” their father said. “See that she gets back to school safely.”

He nodded. Alexandra resisted a flash of annoyance. Like I can't walk back through the woods by myself? she thought. But she did want to walk with Max, even if she didn't think she needed him.

Maximilian glanced at Alexandra, as if trying to read her face. She looked noncommittally back at him. He turned to his father, and Abraham and Maximilian Thorn shook hands, then the elder Thorn pulled his son into a brief, one-armed embrace. Alexandra watched while feigning disinterest – she had little experience watching fathers and sons interact.

“Your sister is worried about you,” their father told him. Alexandra flushed and looked down.

Her brother smiled slightly. “Little troublemaker should worry about herself.”

Alexandra's flush deepened. Abraham Thorn laughed softly. “Take care of each other. I will be thinking of you, often, until we meet again.”

And suddenly he and his raven vanished.

Alexandra and Maximilian looked at each other.

“So,” her brother asked, after a pause. “Did you get all your questions answered?”

She thought a moment, and shook her head. “Not exactly.”

He nodded. “Remember what I said. He knows sooner or later you'll have to tell someone from the Wizard Justice Department about this meeting. Anyway, you can't catch up on twelve years in one night.” He squinted at her, and then put a hand on her shoulder. “Let's get back inside. I wouldn't want the Hodag to get you.”

She snorted. “Hodags are a myth. And if there really was a Hodag after us, what makes you think it would get me and not you?”

“Because I can run faster.”

Her mouth dropped open, and she stared at him. His expression was serious, but his lips were pursed together in amusement. She suppressed a grin of her own. “You are such a jerk.”

Charlie made a snickering sound.

No Hodags or other creatures bothered them as they hiked back through the woods. They were nearly back to the lawns surrounding Charmbridge Academy, when some of the trees began to look familiar, and Alexandra realized with a chill that they were not far from the large tree where the wild Boggart had taken residence.

Thinking about the Boggart made her think about her mother, and brought more unpleasant thoughts to mind. Did she really want to confront her mother about how much she really knew about her father? What if Claudia Green already knew everything? What if she just wanted Alexandra to stay at Charmbridge, where the wizarding world, and her freakish, magical daughter, would never bother her?

“Max?” she asked quietly.

“Yes?” He had removed his hand from her shoulder, as they walked through the woods, but he was still close by her side.

“What did you see... when you were alone with the Boggart?”

He stopped walking. She stopped, too, and looked up at him, but now the moon was behind him and all she could see was his profile. He didn't seem to be looking at her.

He was silent a moment, then asked, “Do you want to talk about what you saw?”

She looked down, and shook her head. “Just... how do Boggarts know things? I mean, is what they show you real, or...?”

“Boggarts aren't intelligent, Alex.” He finally turned his head to look down at her. “They're Dark creatures, but they're not smart. They pull fears out of your head and give them form, but that's it.”

“So... whatever they show you just comes from inside your head? It's not real?”

He was silent again for a moment, and then said, “Just because it's inside your head doesn't mean it's not real.”

He didn't speak again until they reached the entrance to Charmbridge Academy. Alexandra was confused by his answer at first – if the Boggart, in the form of her mother, said things her mother had never said, only things she was afraid her mother might say, then it wasn't real, right?

But as they stepped inside, and she raised her hand to wipe at her nose, as the sudden warmth after the cold, dry air outside made it start running, she looked at Maximilian's dark and brooding face, and realized he hadn't been talking about her Boggart at all.

“Better get back to your room, now, and be careful you're not caught, or we're both hexed,” Maximilian cautioned.

She nodded. And as he turned away, she caught his sleeve. “Max.”

He turned back towards her. She smiled at him. "Thanks," she whispered.

He blinked at her, then smiled. He reached his hand out and mussed up her hair. "Get going, Troublesome."

She slapped his hand away and gave him an unconvincing glare, before running down the corridor towards Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall, shushing Charlie as the raven squawked and flapped while trying to hold onto her shoulder.

Four days later, Charmbridge's magical short bus was carrying Alexandra and her friends to Chicago, minus Constance and Forbearance. The Pritchards were to be taken on a separate trip to their drop-off point in the Ozarks.

Alexandra was a little withdrawn. She was looking forward to seeing their rebuilt house on Sweetmaple Avenue, and not being stuck in an apartment anymore. She missed TV and fast food, too. But the thought of asking her mother about Abraham Thorn still put a tight knot in her stomach. She'd rehearsed a dozen variations of that conversation in her head, over and over, and none of them seemed to end happily in her mind.

Maximilian hadn't talked to her after their meeting with their father. She wasn't sure if he was avoiding her, or if it was just her imagination. The Stormcrows were at the front of the bus now, talking and joking, wearing their BMI uniforms as they always did while traveling. They would be dropped off at the Chicago Wizardrail station, along with Anna. All of them would be heading east, while Anna would take the train west to Northern California.

"You gonna be doing anything over Christmas?" David asked.

She blinked and turned her attention back to him and Anna. "No," she replied, shaking her head. "Not that I know of."

Anna gave her a serious, knowing look. Alexandra had told her about Abraham Thorn's visit, and her plans to confront her mother. It wasn't

something she wanted to talk about with David, though. He was her friend, too, but she didn't confide in him the way she did in Anna.

And there were other people on the bus, like Darla and Angelique, sitting at a separate booth. Alexandra had no desire to encourage anyone else to eavesdrop on her.

In the days following Maximilian's 'outing' himself, things had gotten strange for Alexandra at school again. Everyone had been reminded that she was Abraham Thorn's daughter, and now her brother was being shunned and whispered about, much as she had been all last year. On the other hand, there were still girls who weren't deterred by Maximilian's alleged Dark lineage. Alexandra found it somewhat amusing, but mostly annoying, that some of these older girls had suddenly become friendly with her, greeting her by name when they'd never said a word to her previously.

She also thought Constance and Forbearance had been a little distant, and she wasn't sure why. She doubted it was because of her father, so perhaps it was because she hadn't confided in them. Anna was still a little miffed about that, though she'd mostly gotten over it.

The three seventh graders talked about their Christmas plans, and gifts they were hoping for. Alexandra was holding out little hope for a cell phone at this point.

"Why do you want one anyway?" Anna asked, while feeding an owl treat to Jingwei, in her cage. "You can't use it nine months out of the year."

"Yeah, but Larkin Mills can be pretty boring the other three months," she replied. When you don't have any friends, she added silently. She watched while Anna's owl accepted the treat, snapping it up with a beak that could easily remove one of Anna's fingers. Alexandra rested her arm on Nigel's cage; she'd thought it prudent to put a cloth over it, after she saw Jingwei looking at the snake hungrily.

Anna smiled at her sympathetically. Alexandra knew Anna also had few friends at home.

When the conversation turned to next semester's electives, Alexandra said little. They were supposed to have turned in a form listing their preferences for the spring semester, before leaving for home. Alexandra had dithered over it, preoccupied by thoughts about her father and her mother, and her brother, and it was now buried somewhere in the bottom of her book bag, still not filled out.

When they reached the Chicago Wizardrail station, Anna got up, and Alexandra and David did, too, to say good-bye. There was an awkward silence as Darla and Angelique both slid past them to get off the bus as well. Alexandra was relieved that at least Angelique was keeping a Silencing Charm on Honey's cage this time; they hadn't heard an outburst from the jarvey all trip.

"Seeya," David said to the other two girls as they passed by. Darla ignored him, but Angelique gave them all a quick, abashed smile and a wave.

"Have a happy New Year, Alex." Anna gave her a hug. "Promise you'll write."

"Of course." Alexandra hugged her friend back. "I'll miss you."

Anna turned to David and gave him a quick hug too. David rolled his eyes, but accepted the hug willingly enough. "You have a good New Year too, David."

"Yeah, you too."

"All right, get off the bus, you're blocking the aisle!" someone barked. Anna jumped and stiffened.

"Quit being a jerk, Max," Alexandra snapped, glaring at her brother, who was now standing behind Anna and towering over her.

"Merry Christmas, Chu," drawled Maximilian sardonically, as the smaller girl squeezed past him, with both arms wrapped around Jingwei's cage. She hurried to the exit at the front of the bus. He turned back to Alexandra, who was shaking her head, with her arms folded across her chest.

Maximilian grinned at her. "I'm sorry you're stuck in Muggle land over the holidays, Alexandra." He ignored David's indignant scowl, and held out a package. "But here's a present for you. Put it under your tree. Muggles have Christmas trees too, right?"

"Yes." Torn between wanting to give her brother a hug, and wanting to hex him, Alexandra took the package. "I'll have to send you your present."

"No need." He smiled at her and waved. "See you in a couple of weeks."

She felt oddly disappointed as she watched his retreating back. He joined Beatrice and Martin and the other Stormcrows, and disembarked.

The bus left Chicago, and rolled through a series of barricades that looked more like iron fortresses than tollbooths, manned by large, ugly trolls collecting gold coins from each passing vehicle. From there they traveled along the Automagicka towards Detroit, surrounded by smaller wizarding vehicles. Some looked much like Muggle automobiles, while others could obviously only be held together by magic. Alexandra and David both stared out the window when something that looked like a giant pumpkin on wagon wheels bounced past at a speed no pumpkin should travel.

When Mrs. Speaks stopped the bus again, after exiting the Automagicka at Detroit, it was in front of a very large Tudor-style brick house on a wide, elm-lined street, in what looked like a rather wealthy neighborhood.

"Take it easy, Alex," said David. They shook hands before he got off. She heard him shouting, "Mom! Dad!" before the iron gates in front of the house swung open. Alexandra had never seen David's parents before; she pressed her hands against the window and watched a beautiful, dark-skinned woman with silky black hair pull him into a hug. The nearly-bald black man next to her was built like a refrigerator. Alexandra was a little surprised at what a big man Mr. Washington

was, considering that David was definitely on the scrawny side. Then the bus pulled away, and David's house disappeared from sight.

This left her as the only seventh grader remaining on the bus. Some more kids were dropped off in the Detroit area, and then the bus got on the Automagicka again, and Alexandra sat alone with Charlie, Nigel, and her thoughts until they reached Larkin Mills.

Leave That World Behind

The brand new house at 207 Sweetmaple Avenue looked very much like the house Alexandra had grown up in. Her room was once again upstairs, overlooking the back yard. It was a little larger than her old room, which she liked, but it was directly above her parents' bedroom, which she didn't like.

Many things looked almost exactly like their old house – the fireplace, for example, was in exactly the same location, and the living room had the same open space between it and the dining room, and the same door to an almost identical hallway to the stairs. But the kitchen was on the other side of the dining room, there was a large den where there had once been a back porch and a storage closet, and the carpets and wood paneling were all new and (Alexandra thought) not as attractive as the old interiors. She kept finding herself looking for things where she knew them to be in the old house, or expecting to find a door that had moved to another wall.

It didn't really seem much nicer than their old house, just newer. Alexandra was happy to be back 'home,' though.

As usual, her mother and stepfather were both working throughout the week, right up until Christmas. They had both welcomed her home, but Alexandra thought her mother had been more enthusiastic about showing her the new house than she had been about seeing her daughter again. Archie, as usual, had been gruff and said little, after giving her a brief, awkward hug.

Just like the previous winter, Alexandra waited for an opportunity to confront her mother, and there never seemed to be a good time. When Claudia Green came home from work, she was tired and untalkative, or else Archie was there too, and Alexandra didn't want to have this conversation in front of her stepfather.

She spent most of her time watching TV or reading. Sometimes she played computer games, when her parents would let her use the computer. She went shopping for Christmas presents, and spent a lot of time looking for something for Maximilian, while wondering how she would send it to him.

Should have thought of that before I left Charmbridge, she scolded herself. But she had no idea what to get for him. It occurred to her, belatedly, that for all the time she had spent with her brother, learning about brooms and spells, she hadn't really gotten to know him as well as she would have liked. Maximilian had talked a bit about his family and the wizarding world, but not much at all about himself. What was his favorite food? What subjects was he particularly good at in school? What did he do during summer vacation? Did he prefer Quidditch or Quodpot?

She didn't even know for certain whether Maximilian had a girlfriend – though if he did, she thought she'd have noticed. And he probably wouldn't have wanted to spend so many evenings with his younger sister.

She found a sports jersey for David at the mall, and mailed it to him four days before Christmas, even though her mother shook her head and warned her that it was likely to arrive late. She'd received a package in the mail that same day from him. Alexandra had mailed a present to Anna the day she got home – it was a disposable camera that didn't require a battery or charger. She thought Anna would enjoy the Muggle item, something she could keep even in her strict household, where her wizard father allowed no electronic devices. She had two more for Constance and Forbearance; she was hoping they were going to send her a present as well, not so much because she wanted a present, but because if they sent their owls, as they had last year, she could send their presents back to them by return trip.

She also bought a birthday card and another present to send Anna later – a book of gift certificates for a popular burger chain, since Anna's father rarely allowed her to go out to eat “Muggle food.” But her failure to find a present for Maximilian nagged at her. She stared at the wrapped gift he'd given her, now sitting underneath the tree in her living room, feeling guilty. Anna, she thought, would have told her to plan more carefully. Anna would never wait until the last minute, when it was too late.

I'll give him a late present, when we get back to school, she sighed to herself. She knew that was a really lame thing to do, even if he had said he didn't expect a gift.

On Christmas Eve, three sets of visitors came to 207 Sweetmaple Avenue.

The first, she had been expecting: a pair of barn owls tapping at her bedroom window. She opened it with a grin. "Hi guys," she greeted them. "You've grown a lot bigger since last year!"

The Pritchards' owls hooted cheerfully as they hopped inside. Charlie squawked a greeting, while Alexandra untied the package the two travelers from the Ozarks had brought her, and read the accompanying card:

"We miss our home and family,
throughout the livelong year;
it's hard sometimes to be so far
from all that we hold dear.
But you know we miss you terrible,
and wish that you were here.

Wishing you a Merry Christmas, and a wonderful New Year.

Love,
Constance and Forbearance"

Alexandra smiled, relieved that the twins weren't upset at her after all. "I've got something for you to take back to Constance and Forbearance," she told the owls. Then, when she noticed them peering intently at Nigel through the bars of his cage, she exclaimed, "Hey!" sharply enough to make them jump and let out startled hoots.

"I've got food for you," she scolded them. "Nigel isn't on the menu!"

She felt a little guilty after sending them off, each with a camera clutched in its talons – it was a heavy burden for such modestly-sized owls, and a long way back to the Ozarks. She frowned at Charlie. "It would be nice if you'd deliver things, like Hagar does."

The raven squawked indignantly and looked away, beak high in the air.

The second set of visitors was unexpected, and to Alexandra's mind, not entirely welcome: the Seaburys rang their doorbell that evening, just after Archie had returned home. He greeted them at the door, still wearing his Larkin Mills Police Department uniform, and then his wife joined him, and welcomed Mr. and Mrs. Seabury, Brian, and Bonnie inside. Alexandra had already come downstairs, to see who was at the door, and stood there silently while Mrs. Seabury handed Mrs. Green a pie.

"We thought we should come by and wish you a Merry Christmas, and also tell you how happy we are that you've moved safely back in after that terrible fire," said Mrs. Seabury.

Alexandra didn't miss the word 'should,' though she thought perhaps she was being too cynical. (She'd been thinking a lot about whether or not she was cynical, after her father called her that.) Mrs. Seabury seemed sincere. But Alexandra knew Brian's mother had never exactly approved of her, and probably wasn't too upset about the fact that she and Brian were no longer close.

"We have a housewarming gift for your family also," said Mr. Seabury, handing a perfectly gift-wrapped box to Archie.

While the adults exchanged pleasantries, and Mr. and Mrs. Green invited the Seaburys inside, Alexandra and Brian stared at one another, neither sure what to say. Brian was wearing a suit, and Bonnie was wearing a dress, and Alexandra heard Mrs. Seabury mention that they were all on their way to Christmas Eve services at their church. She invited Alexandra's family to come along. Alexandra winced mentally, even though she was sure her mother would decline. She thought Brian looked like he was trying not to wince as well.

"Hi, Alex." Bonnie broke the uncomfortable silence.

Alexandra looked at the younger girl, and managed a smile. "Hi, Bonnie. How's school?"

“Okay,” Bonnie replied, and then Alexandra's mother suggested, “Why don't you show Brian and Bonnie your new room, Alex?”

Alexandra shrugged. “It's pretty much like my old one.” But she knew that was actually adult-speak for, ‘You kids go upstairs so we grown-ups can talk,’ so she turned and went back upstairs, not looking back to see if Brian and Bonnie were following.

They were, and a moment later, the two of them entered her bedroom and looked around. Bonnie stared wide-eyed at Charlie, and then squealed excitedly when she saw Nigel. “You have a snake!” she exclaimed.

“Yeah.” Alexandra smiled a little, while she avoided looking at Brian. Bonnie was fascinated by the brown snake, though she looked as if she were afraid to get too close.

“I thought your mom and stepfather wouldn't ever let you have a pet,” Brian muttered.

Alexandra had wanted a pet for years, and Claudia and Archie had been unbending. They had been less than enthusiastic when she brought Charlie home from her first trip to the Goblin Market last year, and they were even less happy about the addition of Nigel.

Alexandra's long-denied desire for a pet was one of those many little details Brian knew about her, because they had been friends for years. Now, Alexandra just looked at him and shrugged. “They changed their minds.”

“A crow and a snake – that's so cool!” Bonnie enthused.

Charlie squawked angrily. Bonnie jumped back, and Alexandra said, “Charlie's a raven, not a crow.”

“Oh.” Bonnie stared at the raven. “Sorry.”

“Charlie's a raven, not a crow,” Charlie repeated.

Bonnie's eyes went wide. "It talks!"

"Ravens can do that." Alexandra hid her own surprise.

Bonnie stared at Charlie a moment longer, then turned to look at Alexandra. "Are you really a witch?"

If Charlie had surprised her, Bonnie's question stunned her. She looked at Brian, who was turning red. "Bonnie!" he hissed.

"It's what the kids at school say," said Bonnie. "And I figured, if you have a pet crow – I mean raven, and snake, and, you know, the other stuff..."

Brian grabbed his sister by the arm and pulled her close to him. "Bonnie, Mom told you never to say things like that!"

Alexandra folded her arms. "What if I am a witch?" she asked.

The other two kids looked up at her. Brian had a pained expression – but Bonnie, Alexandra noted, looked excited by the idea.

"You're not a witch," Brian said firmly. "Witches aren't real. Magic isn't real."

"It is so!" Bonnie insisted. "We've seen magic! You know we did, Brian!" She turned to look at Alexandra, with a pleading expression. "We did see those things, didn't we? That thing in the pond, and you making Tom Gavin eat worms, and the store dummy –"

Brian looked desperate. His eyes met Alexandra's.

For a moment, she felt fury. She remembered him turning his back on her. She remembered him calling her a 'freak,' last Christmas. Did he think Bonnie would forget about everything if he just pretended it didn't happen? He acted like he could make Alexandra's magic not real by saying so.

Brian was the first to look away. Then Alexandra remembered his ghostly, cursed, accusing expression, back in the Boggart's hollow.

She looked at Bonnie, who thought Alexandra was dangerous and cool and magical, and saw the younger girl's bloated, drowned face, a dead thing floating in water.

She wondered what the Seaburys' church taught about witches.

"Like Brian says," Alexandra mumbled, "witches aren't real."

Bonnie looked crestfallen. "But we saw —"

"Forget what you saw!" Alexandra snapped. Bonnie blinked and stared at her.

Alexandra narrowed her eyes at the other girl. "Don't go around talking about magic or saying I'm a witch! Understand? No one will believe you."

She felt a pang of guilt, as Bonnie's eyes filled with a look of disappointment, and betrayal.

"Brian, Bonnie!" called their mother from downstairs. "We're going now."

"Gotta go," Brian mumbled. "See you later."

"Yeah, sure." Alexandra didn't bother to walk back downstairs with them, but threw herself onto her bed after they'd gone.

Charlie fluttered down to land on her stomach. Alexandra winced as the bird's weight settled onto her. "You've got sharp claws, Charlie!" she protested.

The raven shifted from one foot to the other, until it had balanced itself and its talons were no longer poking her through her shirt.

"Big fat jerk," said Charlie, in a voice that almost sounded commiserating.

Alexandra gasped in surprise, then laughed. She reached one hand up and very gently stroked her familiar's black feathered head.

"Yeah, he is," she whispered. She ran her thumb along Charlie's beak, and Charlie nibbled at it affectionately.

Despite her sulky mood, she joined her parents that evening after dinner, as they all drank cocoa and watched Miracle on 34th Street. Alexandra lay on the floor by the Christmas tree, in her pajamas, while Archie sat on the sofa with his arm around Claudia. Alexandra studied them, out of the corner of her eye. She and Archie had never quite been able to warm up to each other. But she remembered her father's question about her stepfather. Archie Green, she concluded reluctantly, had been better to her and her mother than Abraham Thorn had been.

"No need for you to wait up for Santa Claus..." Archie told her, as she headed upstairs.

"...because I'm on his permanent Naughty List. Yeah, I know." She rolled her eyes. He'd made that same joke every year for as long as she could remember, even though the girl who could do magic, and who had believed in goblins and elves long before she'd actually seen them, had never believed in Santa Claus. "Good night, Archie."

Her third visitor that night was solitary, and came after Alexandra had gone to bed. A tapping on her window woke her up, before Charlie began squawking.

"Shh, Charlie!" Alexandra hissed. She didn't want Archie to start yelling at her through the floor. She looked out the window, and froze when she saw another enormous raven sitting on her sill.

For a moment, she considered not opening the window, but then the raven outside spoke aloud: "Alexandra!"

She unlatched the window and raised it, shivering a little as a cold winter breeze swept into her room. She stared at Hagar, who hopped inside without further invitation, croaked, "Alexandra!" again, and held out one large, rough talon, which had something wrapped around it.

Carefully (Hagar's talons, she thought, could easily rip someone's skin open), Alexandra untied the little bundle from around the raven's leg, and held it up. A gold chain slipped out of it and tumbled to her desk. She picked it up, and her eyes fixed on the locket dangling from the chain.

Her fingers fumbled a little at the latch, and then with a click, it opened, and she saw a cameo of her father, Abraham Thorn.

The small image moved, and her father said, "Merry Christmas, Alexandra. Please keep this locket with you. It would mean a very great deal to me."

She stared at it, and then at Hagar, who was watching her with beady black eyes. She looked back at the cameo.

"Can you talk to me through this?" she asked.

Her father's image smiled, and much like the locket she'd possessed last year, did not respond further to any entreaties, merely behaved like a normal wizard photograph.

Hagar croaked, "Merry Christmas!" and then took off, flapping out her window and into the night.

Alexandra looked at Charlie, who was now wide-awake and shivering a little. She closed the window, and considered the locket a moment, and her father's smiling visage.

She snapped it shut, wrapped the chain around it, and dropped it into her desk drawer, before checking on Nigel and then crawling back into bed.

Christmas morning, Alexandra came downstairs still in her pajamas. It made her feel like a little girl again, which wasn't an entirely bad feeling. She saw that Archie had lit the fireplace. Despite her mixed feelings about her stepfather and her ongoing anxiety about confronting her mother, she had many happy memories of running downstairs on Christmas mornings to open her presents. Archie and Claudia weren't always both there – this was the first Christmas in

several years when both of them had the day off. She sat cross-legged on the floor, while her mother sat down on the couch in a bathrobe, next to Archie. Both of them were drinking coffee.

The fire felt nice. Alexandra looked at the fireplace for a moment, as if examining it for malicious signs – something like the burst of magic, fueled by her errant curse, that had burned down their house last Christmas. But everything seemed normal. Unlike last year, there was no blizzard outside; indeed, there hadn't yet been a sign of snow this winter.

“Well,” said her mother. “It looks like you have quite a few presents from your friends this year.”

Alexandra nodded. They took turns unwrapping gifts – she received clothes, gift certificates, and books from her mother and stepfather, and a computer game. The housewarming/Christmas gift from the Seaburys turned out to be a deluxe bread maker. Claudia made politely appreciative sounds, while Alexandra rolled her eyes. Had Mrs. Seabury ever met her mother? She doubted the bread maker would ever be used.

Anna's gift was wrapped in red paper: a small gold charm, in the shape of a Chinese character. There was a second gift wrapped in plain paper, with the words “For Nigel” written on it. It was an ordinary-looking, smooth, flat rock.

“A snake in your house means your family will never starve,” said the accompanying note from Anna, explaining the Chinese character. Alexandra smiled, and put the charm on the bracelet around her wrist, next to the raven symbol Anna had given her last year. The rock puzzled her, until she turned it over in her hands and felt it becoming warm. She grinned, realizing it was Anna's way of making peace with having to share their room at school with Nigel.

Alexandra was expecting something hand-crafted from the Pritchards, but she was a little nonplussed to unwrap the bundle they'd sent and find a pair of white socks.

“Your friends sent you socks?” Archie asked, looking amused, as she held them up with a small frown.

Maybe they were still upset with her, she thought. Then she found the note pinned to them.

“We knitted these Lucky Socks ourselves from the hair of a white hound. They are specially lucky against Dark forces. (Not that you oughter be anywhere near such works!) Love, C&F.”

She smiled as she folded them and laid them aside. She wasn't sure if she believed they were really “lucky” – Ozarkers believed in a lot of superstitions that were considered odd even in the wizarding world – but clearly Constance and Forbearance had put quite a bit of effort into her present, and she felt a little guilty that all she'd gotten them was something she'd bought at the SuperMart.

David's gift was next. She gasped when she opened it.

“A cell phone!” she exclaimed. And it wasn't just any cell phone – it was a slim, compact model that also played music and could access the Internet.

Her mother and stepfather looked at each other, while Alexandra excitedly opened the box and tore open the packaging around the phone. “Oh, man, I'm really going to have to apologize for calling him short and nerdy!”

Archie cleared his throat. “So, who is this David?”

“He's my friend at school. He's another Mu–umm, Michigan student.”

“And he sent you a cell phone,” her mother commented. “An expensive cell phone.”

The 'expensive' part hadn't registered until now, but as Alexandra looked at the shiny new phone, she realized that it was an awfully expensive gift. It had certainly cost many times what she'd spent on David's present.

“Er, yeah, I guess.” She looked up at her parents, and saw the way they were looking at her.

“Oh, come on!” she protested, her face turning red. “It's not like that!”

“Not like what?” her mother asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I know what you're thinking! David's just a friend!”

“Maybe you think he's just a friend.” Archie pointed at the phone. “But that's quite a present to give a friend.”

“Especially a seventh grader,” Claudia agreed.

Alexandra's face was turning redder and redder. “No way!” she stammered. “David's not – there's no way!”

Claudia and Archie both frowned. She looked at them unhappily. “Are you not going to let me keep it?”

Her mother cleared her throat. “I think you need to have a talk with David. If he thinks this present means you're more than friends, you need to give it back.”

“No. I'm sure that's not what he thinks,” she insisted, trying not to sound as dismayed as she felt. It wasn't possible, was it? Could David actually have a crush on her? She started going over every interaction they'd had, over the past semester. Had he ever behaved any differently towards her? They hadn't even hugged when he got off the bus at Detroit, just shook hands. And when she'd asked him whether he liked Angelique, he'd blushed – was he really blushing because it was her she liked?

The idea was extremely unsettling. She liked David, but she didn't like him! What would she do if he wanted to be her boyfriend? Having to give back the phone suddenly seemed like the least of her worries.

In a much less festive mood now, she opened Maximilian's present. It was a glass cube, displaying photographs, like plastic paperweight picture-holders she'd seen in department stores.

Except they were wizard photographs, and they were moving, and different pictures would fade in and out on each surface. Alexandra's mood lightened, and she smiled as she saw some of the pictures Sarah Wittencroft had taken of her and Maximilian. There she was, standing next to her brother, both of them in uniform, he with his arm around her, and there was another one, with Beatrice laughing and grabbing her arms while she squirmed and made angry faces at Maximilian, who was tickling her in the ribs, and Martin, who was mussing up her hair.

There were other pictures that had been taken by Bea or Martin while they were out in the woods, practicing dueling. In one, she was standing with her back to Maximilian, holding her wand as he corrected her stance and her grip. In another, she was tumbling backwards over a log as a hex knocked her off her feet. She winced as she remembered that day. That hex had hurt!

And there she was sitting on a rock next to Maximilian, both of them looking at whoever was taking the picture – Beatrice or Martin, she couldn't remember – and both of them seemed at ease and comfortable. And, for the first time, Alexandra looked at the two of them together and thought that he really did look like her brother.

Lost in thought, she only realized what it was she was looking at when she glanced up at Claudia and Archie, and saw them staring at the moving pictures in the cube.

“What is that?” her stepfather demanded, frowning.

“Those pictures are of you,” her mother said quietly.

“Yeah,” Alexandra mumbled. “It's just a toy.” She hastily put the cube back in its box. What was Maximilian thinking, giving her a gift like that when he knew she was going home to Muggles?

“Who is that boy?” her mother asked. “Who gave you this present?”

"No one! Just a friend from school!" Alexandra stammered. It didn't sound very convincing, but Archie rarely tried to pick apart her explanations, and her mother –

Alexandra stared at her mother. Claudia Green looked pale.

"He's not my boyfriend either," Alexandra added.

Her mother blinked, and took her eyes off the box with the picture cube, and looked at Alexandra.

Maximilian might look a little like her, Alexandra thought, but he looked a lot more like his father. And she was pretty sure her mother had seen that. She opened her mouth, and wished desperately that Archie weren't in the room.

"Well, I should hope not. He looks much too old." Claudia rose from the couch. "I'll fix us some breakfast now. Make sure to clean up the wrapping paper, Alexandra."

Alexandra slowly pushed the wrapping paper into a pile, and then carried her presents upstairs. She put her "lucky socks" in a drawer with her other socks. She laid the rock Anna had sent on the bottom of Nigel's cage, and watched as the snake inspected it with his tongue, and then slowly slithered over to curl up around it. She put the cell phone on her desk, along with the instructions for activating it. Her first call, she thought, would have to be to David.

Then she sat on her bed for a while, holding the photo cube in her hands, watching Maximilian grin as he teased her, studying Beatrice as she and Martin linked arms with Maximilian behind her, and reliving that tumble over the log again and again. Finally, she opened the same drawer where she'd put her father's locket, and set the cube next to it.

Her mother's demeanor had rapidly gone from inquisitive to evasive, when she saw those wizarding photographs, and considering how she'd demanded answers about the cell phone, Alexandra thought Claudia Green's sudden disinterest in a cube with moving

photographs, showing her daughter in uniform, and cavorting with a strange boy, was highly suspicious.

Today was Christmas. Tomorrow, Archie was on duty again, but her mother had the day off.

She looked at the phone again, and thought about calling David now, but he was probably celebrating Christmas with his parents. And she decided she'd rather deal with one confrontation at a time anyway.

The next day, Alexandra woke up early, and made herself breakfast, as she usually did while at home. Her mother shambled out of the master bedroom, bleary-eyed and half-awake as always, before she'd had her morning cup of coffee. She blinked when she reached the kitchen counter and found that Alexandra had already started a pot.

"Good morning," Alexandra said, sipping some orange juice.

"G'morning." Her mother looked at her, with something akin to suspicion. "Thanks for starting coffee for me." Her suspicion was understandable, since Alexandra had never done that before.

Alexandra nodded, and continued eating her cereal while her mother poured herself a bowl, waited for the coffee to finish brewing, and then sat down across the kitchen table from her daughter with a bowl and a mug.

Outside, the sky was cold and gray. It looked like it might snow. Alexandra finished her cereal, studying her mother as she waited for her to come fully awake.

Claudia Green's long hair was not straight like her daughter's. Alexandra had seen pictures of her mother as a teenager; Claudia's slightly wavy, once-blonde hair was now turning a sort of mousy brown, and a strand or two of gray was visible already. She was not exactly overweight, but Alexandra so far showed no signs of inheriting her mother's soft, gently-rounded figure. Her face still held some of the prettiness of her youth, but she was not in any way remarkable-looking.

Her mother wasn't an unattractive woman, and she was smart, and nice enough, but she was just so ordinary – Alexandra tried to imagine what had attracted a powerful wizard like Abraham Thorn to Claudia Quick, even a younger and prettier Claudia Quick. Not that she thought her father would necessarily have chosen Claudia for her looks alone, but – she was a Muggle! What else would have drawn him to her?

Her mother noticed Alexandra staring at her, and raised an eyebrow. “Do I have something in my teeth?” she asked.

Alexandra shook her head. “I’ll be getting my report card any day now,” she said.

“Oh,” Claudia replied. “Are you doing well in your classes?”

“Funny, you’ve never asked that before.” Alexandra’s voice was flat.

Her mother blinked. “Don’t be silly. Of course I have.”

Alexandra shook her head. “Not since I started attending Charmbridge.”

Mrs. Green took her time over another sip of coffee. “I think you’re exaggerating.”

“You’ve never seen any of my report cards. You’ve never asked for them.”

“Well, you’ve always done well enough in school, when you bother to do the work, and not sass the teacher –”

“So you just kind of assumed everything was all right?” Alexandra’s hands were clenching the edges of her cereal bowl. “You weren’t interested in checking on me?”

Her mother sighed. “Honestly, Alex. You act offended that I trust you’re doing fine. I assumed Dean Grimm would contact me if you were having problems.”

Alexandra let out an unexpected laugh, with an edge of bitterness.

Claudia slapped her mug down on the table, annoyed. "Is there something you want to tell me?" she demanded.

"I met my father," Alexandra said, staring directly into her mother's eyes.

Claudia Green seemed to freeze, not all at once, but slowly, as if the shock that came from hearing those words was seeping into her bit by bit, robbing her of speech and movement.

"His name is Abraham Thorn. You know that, don't you?"

Her mother just stared at her.

"Do you know what he is?" Alexandra swallowed, as the words that she'd been forcing out suddenly stuck in her throat. "Do you know what I am?"

"I – I –" Her mother was trying to stammer something, but all that came out was a breathless whisper.

"Do you know what I am?" Alexandra repeated, her voice rising.

"You're my daughter," her mother murmured.

"Abraham Thorn is a wizard!" Alexandra shouted. "And I'm a witch!"

The words hung in the air, and in the moment that Alexandra realized they couldn't be taken back, she wasn't sure whether she was sorry or not.

Claudia put her hands over her face and shook her head. "Alexandra, stop it."

"Stop what? STOP WHAT? Do you think I'm making this up?"

She jumped when her mother's fists suddenly descended on the table with a thump. "Stop shouting!" Claudia snapped.

Alexandra sucked in a breath. She opened her mouth to speak again, but her mother held a hand up. "No. Stop. I don't want to hear any more."

Alexandra stared at her. "You... what?"

She had been prepared for denial, for a confession, maybe for confusion – it had occurred to her, despite what her father had told her, that perhaps her mother had had all memories of Abraham Thorn and witchcraft Obliviated from her mind. She wasn't prepared for this reaction, though.

"I don't need to hear about... witches, and wizards," her mother said. "And I don't need to hear about your father."

Alexandra's mouth opened and shut. She was speechless.

Her mother reached across the table, slowly, and grasped her hand. "Do you like it at Charmbridge?" she asked.

Alexandra swallowed, and nodded.

'Why couldn't you just stay at Charmbridge? You know I never wanted you to come back.'

Those had been the Boggart's words. Not her mother's. Her mother didn't look angry or disgusted. Just – sad. "You don't need to talk any more about magic and wizards, or your father, then."

Alexandra shook her head in confusion. She felt her hand shaking a little, as her mother held it.

"Did – did he hurt you?" Alexandra whispered.

Claudia's eyes clouded over for a moment, and then she shook her head. "No. Not in the way you mean."

"Why can't you talk about him, then? Why can't you tell me anything? Why did I have to find out the way I did? Why did you never even ask

what I'm doing at school? Don't you want to know? Don't you care? Or do you hate what I am?"

"No." Her mother squeezed her hand. "Not that. Never think that, Alex." She closed her eyes, and took a long, deep breath. Everything else in the world was irrelevant. There was just her mother sitting at the table with her, and years of unanswered questions.

When Claudia opened her eyes again, she fixed her gaze on her daughter.

"I want nothing to do with your father, or his world," she said. "I need you to respect my wishes on this, Alexandra. I know..." She swallowed. "I know it's your world, now." For a moment, Alexandra had the horrifying thought that her mother might cry, but she didn't. "You will always be my daughter. But when you come home, I want you to leave that world behind."

"Okay," Alexandra answered, in a small voice. She didn't know what else to say. All her anger had evaporated.

Claudia Green stood up, and leaned across the table to kiss her daughter on the forehead. "I think I need some more coffee." She walked into the kitchen to refill her cup, while Alexandra sat there, staring at her empty cereal bowl.

Two owls came to Sweetmaple Avenue the next day. Alexandra had spent most of the day in her room. Her mother was back at work, and her stepfather was at home, and Alexandra didn't really want to talk to him. Even Archie had noticed how listless she was. She sat at her desk, holding Nigel in her hands, letting the snake coil around her fingers, or else lay in bed, reading a book or sometimes turning the picture cube Max had given her over and over in her hands.

Her first visitor was a familiar great horned owl, and Alexandra smiled for the first time since Christmas Day when she opened the window. "Hi, Jingwei!"

Jingwei hooted and stepped inside. Charlie, fortunately, was somewhere outside. The two birds got along when Anna and

Alexandra were present, but Alexandra knew Charlie was becoming more nervous as Jingwei grew larger.

Alexandra untied a letter from the owl's leg, and gave her some treats, then snapped her fingers in front of the raptor's face, heedless of that powerful beak, when she caught her staring intently at Nigel's cage. "Forget it!"

Jingwei looked at her and hooted reproachfully. Alexandra kept half an eye on the owl as she read Anna's letter, noticing that the bird's eyes repeatedly rolled in the snake's direction.

Anna sounded cheerful, but lonely. She didn't mention it in her letter, but Alexandra knew Anna's thirteenth birthday was in three days, and that there would probably only be family members there to celebrate it with her. Anticipating Jingwei's visit, Alexandra had Anna's birthday card and present ready. She made the big owl wait while she wrote a reply to slip into the envelope along with the card. She only briefly mentioned talking to her mother about Charmbridge – she didn't want to spoil Anna's holiday making her worry, and she also wasn't sure that the Office of Special Inquisitions couldn't intercept owls and read her mail.

Once Jingwei had taken off, Alexandra laid her gifts out on her desk – the locket from her father, the picture cube from Maximilian, the cell phone from David. Idly, she toyed with the charms dangling from her bracelet given to her by Anna, as she watched herself goofing off and dueling and being teased by Maximilian, Martin, and Beatrice, over and over. Finally, she took out the bright red cell phone and followed the instructions to activate it.

It was sleek and very cool. She held it in the palm of her hand, looking at the little screen that could display web pages, music videos, and even games. It was really a shame that it wouldn't work at school. And that she couldn't use it to call Anna, or Constance and Forbearance.

With a sigh, she dialed David's number.

"Yo!" she heard David say, only a second later.

“Hi,” she said. “Merry Christmas.”

“Alex! You got the phone?” He sounded pleased.

“No duh. What do you think I’m using to call you, dufus?”

He laughed. They talked for a little while about their Christmas presents, and the dozens of aunts and uncles and cousins visiting David's house in Detroit, and whether they thought it was snowing in the Ozarks, where Constance and Forbearance lived. Alexandra felt better, hearing David's voice, but she was still feeling dispirited and unnerved by her conversation with her mother. Somehow Brian came up in the conversation, and she wound up telling David about Brian and Bonnie's visit, and then she was telling him everything – meeting Abraham Thorn in the woods, confronting her mother, and now sitting at home with no fewer questions than she'd had before.

She was lying on her bed now, staring up at the ceiling, and wondering why she was telling all this to David. At some point, Charlie had returned, and was now sitting on a bedpost looking down at her.

“Wow,” David said finally.

“Yeah,” she replied.

He was silent for a while, then he said, “I’m glad I can talk to my folks about... you know. Being a wizard. They don't totally understand it, but they're interested. 'Course I don't tell them some of the more freaky stuff either.”

“Like walking across a valley on an invisible bridge?”

“That sometimes disappears. Yeah.” He laughed.

They were both quiet for a bit. Then she said, “I’m sorry I called you up the day after Christmas to complain about my parents.”

“Nah. S'all right.”

She hesitated. "Thanks a lot for the phone, David. It was a nice gift. A really nice gift."

"Cool. I'm glad you like it. Too bad we can't text each other at school, you know?"

"Yeah." She frowned a little, and took a deep breath. "I feel kind of lame, only giving you a sports jersey."

"No, the jersey was cool, really! Don't worry about it!" David protested.

Alexandra cleared her throat. "Yeah, but... a cell phone. It's kind of an... expensive gift."

"Alex, don't worry about it," he repeated. He paused. "Look, my folks kind of have money, all right? I don't talk about it much, 'cause at school, if you've got a Muggle family, that's all that matters – your folks could be rich or poor, but you're still a Mudblood. So, whatever. But it's no big deal, really."

Alexandra frowned. There weren't actually that many students at Charmbridge who insulted Muggle-borns, but now wasn't the time to get David agitated again. "It kind of was a big deal for my mom and stepdad," she said slowly. "They, umm, they freaked out a little, that a boy was giving me a cell phone."

There was a long pause, followed by a baffled, "Huh?"

He sounded honestly confused. Alexandra blurted out: "David, do you have a crush on me?"

"What? No!"

There was a much longer pause, during which she squeezed her eyes shut, clenched her teeth, and smacked herself on the forehead, while Charlie hopped from bedpost to bedpost, clucking.

"Look, Alex," David said at last. "I told you before –"

“Yeah, you don't like skinny white girls.”

He made a coughing sound. “Umm, look, no offense...” he mumbled, and Alexandra could tell he was as embarrassed as she was. “I didn't exactly mean it like that.”

“If you do have a crush on me, it's all right. I won't make fun of you, I promise. But I just don't want a boyfriend, okay?”

“I do not have a crush on you!” he declared angrily.

They were both silent again, and then David muttered, “Man, if I knew giving you something you kept talking about wanting was going to cause all this trouble —”

“I'm sorry, David. I'm really sorry. I just — my folks got all weird, and I didn't know what to think, and I was just worried —”

“Alex, I do not have a crush on you. We're just friends. That's it, okay?”

“Okay,” she replied, relieved. She smiled a little. “Do you have a crush on someone else?”

He stammered. “Alex, would you knock it off?”

“Like, I don't know...” And she pitched her voice lower, trying to sound breathless and sultry and Southern: “Some othah girl, from Noo Oh-leans, who has a rillah ob-nahk-shus familiah, and big —”

“Girl, that's the worst accent I've ever heard! Angelique doesn't even sound like that!”

Alexandra laughed.

“If you're gonna keep making fun of me, I'm hanging up,” David said indignantly.

“No, no, I'm sorry,” she apologized quickly. Then, looking at Charlie, she grinned wickedly. “But if you really do like Angelique, David, I'll bet I know a way to find out if she likes you, too...”

By the time they finally hung up, Alexandra had talked the dubious boy into a plan she was certain would work, based on many hours of television-watching.

She had also used up a significant portion of her prepaid account, but that was all right, since when she thought about it, she really didn't know anyone else except David that she could call. Which perhaps made her desire for a cell phone kind of stupid, but she was still glad she had one now. She felt much better, and although she was still plagued by questions and doubts about her mother and father, she felt ready to face the coming year again.

That was when a snow-white owl landed outside her window and pecked demandingly at the glass. Alexandra didn't recognize this one, so she looked quizzically at it as she opened her window.

The envelope it carried bore the Charmbridge Academy seal. When she opened it, she found her report card and her SPAWN results within.

Mrs. Middle had really not liked her essay, she thought, when she saw her Wizarding Social Studies grade.

She cared more about her SPAWN results, which were almost the same as at the end of last year. She had scored 'Average' in all academic areas (even Wizard History, her weakest subject), 'Excellent' in Charms, and 'Superior' in Basic Magical Defense. She was unsurprised that Mr. Grue had given her a 'U' for 'Underperformer' in Alchemy, but she was more disappointed by her Transfiguration score going down to 'Average.'

There was one more item in the envelope the owl had brought: another copy of the form she was supposed to have filled out listing her preferred electives, and a note from Dean Black:

“Miss Quick,

I do not have a copy of your Elective Request Form, which you were supposed to have turned in before the end of the fall semester. You are not a special snowflake who gets to make up her mind at the last minute. In order to plan class schedules for the coming year, it is very important that we have all students' requests for electives as early as possible if we are to accommodate student preferences. If you do not send a properly filled out Elective Request Form by return owl, you will be assigned to whatever class has available openings, at my convenience.

Wishing you and yours happy holidays,

Caelum Black, Dean of the Seventh Grade.”

Alexandra sighed, and looked at the snowy owl, which was hooting impatiently.

She still wanted to take Magical Ecology, though it would be nice to be in the same class with Anna, in Geomancy. Or maybe she should take Muggle Studies. It had to be a pretty easy class, for a Muggle-born.

But her eyes were drawn again to the picture cube, where she was standing proudly in uniform next to her brother. Maximilian had, as promised, not tried to talk her into signing up for JROC again. But she knew he'd be pleased if she did. And more than that, she realized that one of the few pleasures she'd had, the past semester, was seeing his look of approval, and the time she had spent with the Stormcrows, being treated as (almost) one of them.

Anna is going to have a cow, she thought, but she wrote down on the line to list her first choice: 'Practical Magical Exercise,' and at the bottom of the form, checked the box for 'Junior Regimental Officer Corps.'

Dangerous Hearts

The Charmbridge bus came to Larkin Mills in the first week of January, to bring Alexandra back to Charmbridge Academy. The route the short bus took seemed to be different every time; Alexandra knew the first and last stop was usually the Wizardrail station in Chicago, but she was never sure who would be collected before her. This time, she found David and the Pritchards already aboard.

"Hi, Alex," David said, looking a little nervous. She smiled and sat down next to him. He fidgeted in his seat.

"Happy New Year, Alexandra," Constance and Forbearance greeted her in unison.

"We hope you had a nice Christmas," added Constance.

"Well, there wasn't any snow, which was an improvement over last year." Alexandra smiled at the Ozarkers. They seemed more cheerful than they had been in December. As they headed for Chicago, the twins took out the cameras Alexandra had sent them, and snapped pictures of her and David.

"We can't wait to show our pictures in Muggle Studies," said Forbearance.

Alexandra was still bothered by her conversation with her mother, and she wanted to talk about it, but not on the bus. The four seventh graders talked about their holidays, and the upcoming semester, until they left the Automagicka and began moving through Chicago's city streets, gliding between cars and around corners and down narrow alleys through which the bus, even with its magically-reduced exterior, should not have been able to fit. David became increasingly nervous as they approached the Wizardrail station.

"You don't have to do this if you don't want to," Alexandra told him.

David licked his lips. "You really think this will work?"

"It does in the movies."

He frowned. "Yeah, but..."

Constance and Forbearance were looking at them curiously. "What are y'all goin' on about?" Forbearance asked.

"Y'all fixin' to pull some dido from the movies, playful-like?" Constance asked, sounding intrigued.

"Or one 'a them S-F-hex tricks?" Forbearance suggested.

"We was told we might actually see a Muggle movie this semester!" Constance said excitedly.

"Uh, yeah. This is more like a romantic comedy." Alexandra winked, ignoring David's grimace.

"Oh, I'm a-dotin' to see a romance movie!" Constance exclaimed, clasping her hands together over her heart.

"Well, then watch." Alexandra looked at David.

He swallowed. "Okay."

As the bus pulled to a halt in front of the Wizardrail station, Alexandra leaned against David, and he put an arm gingerly around her shoulders, as if afraid it might catch fire. Constance and Forbearance stared.

"Stop looking like you think I've got cooties!" Alexandra hissed, jabbing David with an elbow.

"Ow! Stop elbowing me in the ribs!" he whispered back.

"Then put your arm around me like I'm your girlfriend, dork!"

David curled his arm a little more tightly around her. From the cage which Alexandra had hung above the table, Charlie made a coughing noise that sounded suspiciously like a laugh.

Constance and Forbearance's eyes were as wide as if David and Alexandra had both grown fangs and turned into vampires. Their mouths were agape, and their faces were bright red.

"Relax, guys. We're not really a couple," Alexandra assured them.

Forbearance was fanning herself. Constance exclaimed, "I should hope not! Y'all ain't old enough for courtin'!"

"And... and pawin' each other all in front of everyone!" Forbearance gasped.

"I'm not pawing her!" David protested.

"Shh!" Alexandra implored, putting a finger to her lips. "We're just trying to fool Angelique."

"What?" the twins demanded at once.

"David wants to know if Angelique likes him, so we're going to make her think he likes me," Alexandra whispered. "Then we'll see if she gets jealous."

Their mouths dropped open even further. Both of them began sputtering.

"That... that..."

"...is the most plumb bug-headed..."

"...bodacious..."

"...koosy..."

"...indecent..."

"Alex, what if she doesn't get jealous?" David muttered nervously, as the first students started to board.

"Then you're on your own, sorry." Alexandra shrugged.

David did not look comforted. She shook her head. "Look, Darla and Angelique both think they're the queens of the seventh grade. Trust me, it will drive Angelique crazy if she thinks you like some other girl more than her. Especially me."

They had already been over this plan on the phone, but it had been a lot easier to agree to when it didn't actually involve being stared at by the other kids boarding the bus. Some looked surprised, as they walked past the table where Alexandra was sitting with David's arm around her. Others winked or snickered or whistled. Tomo Matsuzaka walked past, and barely glanced at Alexandra before hastily looking down and hurrying on to where the sixth graders were sitting, in the rear.

Forbearance leaned across the table and whispered, "Everyone's gonna think y'all are sweet!"

Alexandra rolled her eyes as she rested her head against David's shoulder. "Last semester, half the school thought I was dating Maximilian. And don't forget I'm a Dark wizard's daughter, and a Mudblood." The Ozarkers flushed at that, while David frowned. "So you know what?" she concluded. "I think I'm kind of tired of worrying about my reputation."

Forbearance looked flustered, and kept averting her eyes from the 'couple.' "But..."

"It hain't right!" Constance fumed.

"It hain't proper!" Forbearance whispered.

Alexandra sighed. Really, the Pritchards could be so old-fashioned! It wasn't like they were kissing or anything. She wrinkled her nose at the thought, and then brightened when she saw Anna coming down the aisle, holding Jingwei's cage in her arms. The owl hooted, and Anna said, "Hi, guys –" She froze, in the middle of hanging her familiar's cage from another hook overhead, and stared at David and Alexandra, eyes wide as dinner plates.

Alexandra grinned at her and winked. Anna had no idea how to react to that, so she just kept staring.

Then a familiar, syrupy-sweet voice said, "Hello, y'all..." Angelique's voice trailed off as she reached their table and saw Alexandra leaning into David's (still uncomfortable and not entirely convincing) one-armed embrace.

"Well," commented Darla, coming up behind Angelique. She seemed unable to think of anything else to say.

Alexandra saw Honey's beady little eyes staring at her through the bars of her cage. She was sure the jarvey had plenty to say – fortunately, Angelique had apparently put a Silencing Charm on her before boarding the bus.

"Come on, Angelique," Darla prompted haughtily, leading her roommate forward. Both of them gave Alexandra and David another astonished look, before sitting at the table behind theirs.

Anna's mouth was still open, and then yet another voice called out, "Alexandra!"

Alexandra sat up, and was smiling broadly before she realized it, as Maximilian came down the aisle towards them, already in his blue and silver BMI uniform. He paused when he saw David with his arm around his sister, and scowled.

"What's this?" he demanded, and for a moment, Alexandra thought he was going to make a scene right there on the bus.

"Would everyone please sit down?" called Mrs. Speaks from the front of the bus. "I know everyone is very excited to see your friends again, but socialize when we get to Charmbridge, not in the middle of the aisle!"

"Later, Max!" Alexandra pleaded.

He gave David a narrow look, and then her. "Count on it," he growled.

He walked back to the front of the bus where the other Stormcrows were sitting, after casting one more glare over his shoulder at the 'couple.'

"Guess he was surprised, too," Anna commented quietly, after everyone was seated and the bus was moving again. Her own expression was a mixture of confusion and hurt.

"Anna," Alexandra said, reaching across the table to grab her friend's hand. Anna's eyes fell on the bracelet around Alexandra's wrist, and she smiled for a moment at the Chinese characters jingling there, the raven and snake charms. Then she looked back up at Alexandra with a frown.

"It's not what it looks like," Alexandra whispered, in a low voice. "David and I are just playing a trick on Angelique." She tilted her head backwards, in the direction of the two girls in the booth behind them, who were talking about some wizard rock band and Darla's birthday next month.

Anna's forehead wrinkled. "A trick?"

David, by now, looked as if he were having second thoughts about this whole affair. Alexandra rolled her eyes at him and lifted his arm off her shoulders. He pulled away with relief.

"Just don't say anything, okay?" Alexandra whispered.

Anna frowned. "This sounds dumb."

"It surely does!" Constance agreed vehemently.

"You two both oughter be shamed," Forbearance muttered under her breath.

"And I don't think your brother approves, neither," said Constance.

Alexandra grinned. "Yeah, I noticed." She looked at David. "Maybe we won't tell him."

He stared back at her. “You crazy? He looked like he wanted to kill me!”

“What kind of a boyfriend are you if one look from my brother is going to scare you off?” she declared, this time loudly enough to be heard at the next table. David coughed, while Anna opened her mouth, and then just shook her head. But they heard Angelique and Darla's conversation stop, for a moment, and there was a long pause, before the other two girls resumed talking loudly about whether the lead singer of the Wyld Hunt was going to get back together with some Norwegian witch.

“You're both crazy,” Anna muttered.

“Straw-headed ornery mule-crazy,” Constance agreed. She had folded her arms across her chest and looked thoroughly disgusted.

“So, you think holding my hand while we cross the Invisible Bridge might be pushing it?” Alexandra asked innocently. David groaned.

It wasn't until they arrived back at Charmbridge, and were unpacking their things, that Alexandra was able to tell Anna about her Christmas. Anna listened quietly while Alexandra described her mother's reaction to their confrontation, and the days that followed, spent speaking to one another politely but tersely, with a magical elephant constantly in the room.

The other girl shook her head when Alexandra was done. “I'm really sorry, Alex.” She bit her lip thoughtfully. “My mother doesn't like everything about the wizarding world, but she's never asked me to pretend I'm not a witch.”

Alexandra nodded. “Something happened to my mom,” she said quietly. “Maybe my father did something – I don't know. I'm going to ask him.”

Anna looked nervous at that. She'd been remarkably accepting of the fact that her roommate was Abraham Thorn's daughter, but the idea that Alexandra was now having chats with the most wanted wizard in the Confederation clearly unsettled her.

Alexandra set the picture cube Maximilian had given her on her desk, and then considered the locket her father had sent her. She'd opened it a few more times since Christmas, and even tried speaking to Thorn's cameo, but he just smiled at her. He'd said he wanted her to keep it close to her. Did he expect her to wear it?

Charlie cawed, and Alexandra turned to look at the raven, who was eyeing the locket greedily. With a smile, she held it in front of the bird. Charlie snatched it out of her grasp.

"Charlie always liked the first locket I had, too," she said.

Anna nodded. She was looking at the pictures of Alexandra horsing around with Maximilian and the other Stormcrows, with a small frown.

"Um, so, have I mentioned that I signed up for JROC again this semester?" Alexandra asked.

Anna turned her head to look at her, blinking in a manner that made her resemble her owl familiar. "No," she replied slowly. "I don't think you have."

Alexandra stuck her hands into her pockets. "It was just..."

Anna sighed and shook her head. "It's not like you need my permission, Alex. And I can understand. Maximilian is your brother. You want to spend more time with him." She frowned. "But I hope you're not expecting me to join!"

"No," Alexandra laughed. "Just don't get in any more fights with Tomo."

Anna didn't look amused. "My father was furious about that. The first day I got back, he yelled at me for an hour."

"Sorry," Alexandra said.

"He says if the Majokai want their own schools and their own communities, they should stay in them."

Alexandra shrugged. She didn't really understand the Chinese-Japanese feud, and it made her uncomfortable. "But I guess Tomo's parents don't mind letting her mix with non-Majokai kids."

"They probably just realized their schools are primitive and teach old peasant magic," Anna scoffed. "My father says the Japs will steal anything they learn elsewhere and then claim they invented it. They only joined the Confederation because otherwise they would have been kicked out of the country."

Alexandra frowned. "Japs?"

"Japanese," Anna clarified.

"I know what it means," Alexandra said. Her tone and expression were disapproving.

Anna frowned and looked down.

"You aren't going to get in any more fights with Tomo, are you?"

The Chinese witch shook her head. "We didn't say anything to each other on the train."

"Good." Alexandra looked at Charlie, who was pecking at her locket, and Nigel, who was coiled comfortably on his magic rock. She sighed and resumed unpacking her things. Anna did the same.

In the next room, they heard Honey chanting: "Two little Mudbloods, sitting in a tree..."

"Shut up, Honey!" Angelique snapped.

Honey wasn't the only one who parroted unpleasant words, Alexandra thought.

At dinner, Alexandra made sure to smile sweetly at David before sitting down next to him. She was starting to find this game quite amusing. She didn't understand why none of her friends did.

Constance and Forbearance still looked appalled, while Anna just shook her head and rolled her eyes.

“So, has Angelique said anything?” she whispered. The black girl was sitting down the table from them, with Darla, and both of them seemed to be trying not to look at her and David.

He shook his head. “Just 'hello.’”

“Well, did she say 'hello,' or...” Alexandra cleared her throat, and purred a long, sultry “Hellooo,” in another bad imitation of Angelique's Louisiana drawl.

“Would you stop that?” David hissed, as Alexandra started laughing, and even Anna giggled a little. Angelique and Darla both stared down the table at them for a moment. They were too far away to hear exactly what everyone was laughing about, but they seemed to suspect that it involved them.

“How long are y'all fixin' to keep up this koosy lally-gaggin'?” Constance demanded crossly.

Alexandra shrugged. “Until we're tired of it... or until Angelique steals my man!” She clasped her hands over her heart and feigned a dramatic swoon. Anna was now turning red with laughter, while David and the Pritchards were just turning red.

“I should never have listened to you,” David muttered, darting his eyes down the table at Angelique and Darla. “It works in the movies, my foot! You just watch too much TV.”

“Give it time,” Alexandra urged, digging into the wild moon hen and black-eyed peas the cafeteria was serving tonight. “And if it doesn't work, we can always stage a dramatic break-up, and Angelique can be the one to comfort you...”

“Way too much TV,” David groaned.

Anna changed the subject, by telling them about a magical game she'd been given for her birthday, which she said was called Heart of Three Kingdoms.

"It's sort of like a multi-player game of wizard chess," she explained. "Except you use tiles, with no board, and the pieces don't actually move, and you fight by combining elements, and it takes strategy and a good memory."

"That doesn't sound much like wizard chess at all," said David, but everyone was eager to play it nonetheless. The five of them headed for the seventh grade rec room after dinner.

They stopped in the middle of the corridor when someone called Alexandra's name. They turned to see Maximilian, now out of uniform. He was striding after them, wearing a conservative high-collared vest and dark pants with matching boots.

"Hi Max," Alexandra greeted him. She had been hoping to talk to her brother before school started the next day, but didn't really appreciate being accosted in front of her friends. Maximilian didn't seem to care, as he frowned at her and then gave David another unfriendly look. Alexandra noticed Anna trying not to back away from the boy who'd bullied her all last semester, but Constance and Forbearance were both looking at him with wide, ingenuous expressions, and sighing in a manner that unexpectedly annoyed her.

"I want to talk to you." Maximilian's voice was low and surly.

Alexandra looked at her friends. "Go on. I'll catch up."

They nodded, and proceeded towards the seventh grade dorms.

"You know, bossing me around in front of my friends is not cool," Alexandra told him.

"Cool?" He raised an eyebrow, then shook his head. "Come on." He gestured for her to follow him. Slightly annoyed, she did.

"How was your Christmas?" he asked.

“Wonderful. I told my mother I'm a witch and that I know who my father is, and she told me never to talk about it again.”

Maximilian stopped and stared at her, wordlessly.

Alexandra shrugged. “I guess maybe 'Dad' didn't take such good care of her when he left her. What a surprise.”

Her brother sighed. “I'm sorry, Alex. I really wish I knew what to tell you.”

“I hope he does,” she said darkly. “Assuming I ever see him again.”

“You will.” His expression was somber again. “Whatever Father might have done to your mother, it's not your fault, and it's not right for her to expect you to deny your birthright.”

Alexandra shrugged. “I'll deal.”

He frowned again, puzzling over her idiom, then repeated, “It's not right.”

“I'll be fine.” She was suddenly uninterested in pursuing this. She didn't want Maximilian to criticize her mother, or comment on her upbringing. “Hey, I have a present for you!” She smiled, changing the subject.

He smiled back. “I told you —”

“Yeah, I know, but I got one anyway. I hope you like it. Come on.” She changed direction, and this time she gestured at him to follow, and after a moment, he did.

They passed beneath the portrait of the old warlock hanging at the entrance to Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall.

“This is the seventh grade girls' dormitory, young man,” the portrait said sternly to Maximilian, while giving Alexandra a familiar disapproving stare.

"He's my brother," she said, while Maximilian cleared his throat.

The warlock's eyebrows went up. "Really?" He squinted at them. "Well, even so, you are not to have boys in your room, young lady."

"He's my brother!" she repeated, annoyed, but Maximilian reassured the portrait.

"I won't go in her room," he promised. "I'll stay in the hallway."

"See that you do," the warlock replied.

Alexandra rolled her eyes as they continued to her room.

"I know you're trying to distract me," said Maximilian.

"Distract you from what?" she asked innocently.

"Distract me from talking to you about your... about that boy."

"That boy," she repeated, frowning. "You mean my boyfriend?"

Maximilian made a choking sound. "You're too young to have a boyfriend!"

They reached the room she shared with Anna, and she opened the door and stepped inside. "You can come in. That nosy portrait can't actually see down the hall in this direction."

Maximilian folded his arms, and remained standing outside. "No. He's right, it's improper."

Alexandra narrowed her eyes at him. "Right, you've got no problem going to Mors Mortis Society meetings and practicing Dark Arts, but it's 'improper' to set foot in your sister's room?"

He winced, and looked around quickly. "Keep your voice down!" he hissed.

“Our father removed the curse on me.” She grinned. She stopped grinning when she saw his expression. “Okay, okay,” she whispered. She picked up a small book and walked back outside. “But seriously...”

He grabbed her arm, leaning over until he was almost nose to nose with her. “This is not a game, Alexandra!” he snapped. “Do you think this is funny?”

“You're hurting my arm,” she said quietly.

He blinked, and then released her arm and straightened up.

She handed him the book. “I didn't wrap it,” she mumbled. “Sorry.”

Slowly, he looked down at the volume in his hands, and opened the cover. It was a photo album.

Not many photographs had survived the fire on Sweetmaple Avenue the previous year. Alexandra's mother and stepfather had combed the burnt wreckage of their house, and found virtually nothing salvageable. Her mother had a few pictures of Alexandra at work, and so (to her surprise) did Archie. At Alexandra's request, her mother had asked Mrs. Seabury, and Brian's mother had found a few pictures in her own photo albums, of Brian and Alexandra playing together. Alexandra had had copies made of all of them, and put them in the album that her brother was now holding.

Maximilian stared at the pictures of Alexandra at age six, and age eight, and age ten, and then all the subsequent photos that she had taken over Christmas vacation, of herself, and her mother and stepfather and her house, and the Muggle neighborhood where she lived. He looked up at her, finally, and closed the book gently.

“It's all I could think of to give you,” she muttered. “I mean, I can't really buy any magical stuff, and most Muggle things you probably wouldn't be interested in, so I thought –”

“It's an excellent gift,” he said, clasping it to his breast. “Thank you.”

She nodded.

"You're angry at me again."

She glowered at him, eyes smoldering beneath her bangs. "You're being a jerk again."

He looked down at the floor, took a deep breath, and looked up at her again. "I'm sorry. Sometimes you don't seem to take things seriously, and –"

"You lose your temper."

He regarded her solemnly. "I'll never hurt you, Alexandra."

"Not on purpose." She rubbed her arm for emphasis.

She felt guilty at the way he blanched at that, so she forced a smile. "I really liked the picture cube you gave me," she said softly. "Although it kind of freaked out my folks."

He smiled slightly. "I'm not used to worrying about what Muggles see." His expression grew more serious. "Alexandra, are you really... dating that boy?"

She met his gaze, stubbornly keeping her expression deadpan. "What if I am?"

He shook his head. "First of all, you're too young, and secondly, he's completely unsuitable for you."

Her expression darkened. The fact that she wasn't interested in David at all as anything other than a friend was forgotten. Maximilian's disapproval irritated her so much that she probably would have declared him her boyfriend then and there regardless.

"Why?" she demanded. "Because he's black?"

He shook his head, frowning a little. "Not so much that. But he's a Muggle-born."

"You mean a Mudblood?" she exclaimed, her voice rising. "Like me?"

"Merlin!" her brother exclaimed, looking horrified. "Alex, I'd never call anyone that! Or think it!"

"Then what's wrong with David?" she demanded.

He sighed. "I hate the fact that pureblood prejudice still exists, but it does. And since you're already going to have a hard time being accepted, let alone marrying into a respectable family –"

"I am not marrying anyone!" she exclaimed. "Are you crazy? I'm not even thirteen yet! Do you seriously think I'm planning to get married? And even if I was, which is the most stupid, insane idea I've ever heard, why would I care about his family? I'm not going to choose a...a husband because... because he comes from a respectable family! ARE YOU NUTS?"

Maximilian grimaced, and held up his hands pleadingly. "Alexandra... lower your voice. Please."

She stared at him, breathing in and out rapidly, and then looked right and left. Down the hall, Janet Jackson was returning from dinner, and looking at the two of them curiously.

"What are you staring at?" Alexandra snarled at her. The other girl's eyes widened, and she hastily ducked into her room.

Alexandra turned to face her brother again.

"You don't get to tell me whether I'm old enough to have a boyfriend, or if he's good enough for me! I'll date whoever I want! And I'll marry a Muggle if I want!"

"Alexandra," he said, with a grim expression, "I'm just looking out for your reputation and your future –"

"That's not your job! I don't care if Dad says it is!" she yelled fiercely. "You big fat blaggard jerk! And I was going to tell you that I signed up

for JROC again this semester, too, except now I can't believe I was crazy enough to give you a chance to boss me around again! What's next, are you going to tell me who I can be friends with?"

Maximilian winced, and then she backed into her room and slammed the door in his face.

"Alex!" he called, through the door.

"Go away!" she shouted. "This is a girls' dormitory! You shouldn't even be here! It's improper!"

She heard him muttering something, and then his footsteps receded up the corridor. She threw herself on the bed, and lay there sulking, until she heard a rapping on the window. Because it was so cold outside, they had to keep the window shut for Nigel's sake, which meant Charlie had to be let in and out. She rose from her bed and opened the window, only to groan in dismay when she saw something shiny in Charlie's beak.

"Charlie!" she yelled. "You're stealing things again!" She almost grabbed her familiar's beak as she snatched the shiny object away. Charlie let out a startled squawk. Alexandra looked down at the raven's prize, and saw that it was nothing more than a bent piece of copper – it looked like it might have fallen off of one of the academy's Clockworks.

She looked up at Charlie, who had hopped away from her and was now regarding her reproachfully. She sighed, and sat down on her bed, tossing the piece of copper onto her desk with a clatter.

"I'm sorry, Charlie," she said softly. She rubbed her arm absently, where Maximilian had grabbed her, and wondered if the two of them were alike in all the wrong ways.

Charlie cautiously snatched up the brass, and fluttered up to the birdcage hanging over Alexandra's desk. She looked down, and ran a hand through her hair. Then she heard a soft clucking sound, and looked up to see Charlie once more sitting on her desk in front of her.

She held a hand out, almost wishing Charlie would bite her fingers or something to reprove her for her temper. But the bird merely pecked lightly at them instead.

"I'm a jerk too, sometimes," she admitted.

"Big fat jerk," said Charlie.

Alexandra laughed. She took out her father's locket, and gave it to Charlie to peck at, before leaving her room to join her friends in the recreation room.

Even in her distracted state, Alexandra proved quite adept at Anna's game. Her combined stacks of Metal and Fire tiles sent up showers of sparks, devastating Anna's walls of Water and Wood, and David groaned as his Air and Wood tiles were incinerated. But she had to get up before dawn for the first morning of JROC exercises, so she quit early. When they saw Darla and Angelique walking past, on their way back to their own room, Alexandra leaned over and whispered to David, "Kiss me."

He almost dropped his tiles. "What?" he choked, while Constance and Forbearance gasped in shock.

"Give me a good-night kiss, dummy! Quick, while Angelique is watching!"

David's eyes darted towards the two girls out in the hallway, who looked as if they were trying not to watch him and Alexandra through the window of the rec room.

"Don't look at them!" Alexandra hissed. David's head jerked back in her direction. Then, with a nervous gulp, he bobbed his head forward and gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

She rolled her eyes. "Very convincing. Good night."

She smiled sweetly at Darla and Angelique as she emerged from the rec room and walked upstairs to her room. Angelique was just looking at her in astonishment, but Darla's expression was closer to a scowl.

The next morning, she awoke quietly, trying not to wake up Anna, and pulled on her exercise clothes: long baggy pants and a gray jacket, suitable for running around outside in the miserable, cold weather.

I must be crazy, she thought.

Maximilian barely spoke to her, as the JROC assembled for the first formation of the new year. Ms. Shirtliffe barked, "Welcome back!" to everyone, and then sent them running laps around the academy. Conan Smith, Charmbridge's Mage-Sergeant Major, sent ghostly, snarling hounds to nip at the heels of the slowest runners. Witch-Sergeant Adelaide Speir conjured glowing red fires they had to leap over. By the time they finished their exercises, everyone was panting and sweating, despite the near-freezing temperature.

"Enjoying JROC?" Anna asked, a little bit smugly, when Alexandra returned to her room to shower and change into uniform.

"Yeah," she said. "It's a blast."

Anna laughed, and walked with her to breakfast. To their surprise, they found Darla and Angelique sitting with David in the cafeteria. Darla looked chatty; Angelique looked nervous, and more so when Alexandra arrived.

"Good morning!" Alexandra announced, sitting down next to David and patting his hand. He flushed.

"So, you're in JROC again this semester," Darla observed.

"No, I just like wearing uniforms for fun," Alexandra replied.

Darla regarded her coolly. With the tone of a grown-up pointedly ignoring a child's outburst, she said, "I don't imagine that leaves you much free time." She glanced at David, with a raised eyebrow.

Alexandra frowned, and looked at Angelique, who was still silent. She shrugged. "I've got enough free time. I won't be spending any late nights hanging out with loser Dark wizard wannabes, for example."

Darla flushed dark red. Angelique choked on her pumpkin juice.

Darla leaned forward, and hissed, "You mean like your br —"

"Careful, I'd hate to see you drop dead from a curse or something." Alexandra's eyes sparkled maliciously as Darla turned pale.

"What are you guys talking about?" David asked nervously.

"Ask Darla," Alexandra told him. "Oh, wait, she can't tell you. But I can. I had the curse removed." Darla turned even whiter. "Now go away," Alexandra said haughtily, to the other two girls. She patted David's hand again. "I want to talk to my boyfriend."

David started coughing. Darla rose from the table, looking furious, and flounced off. Angelique followed. "Bye," she mumbled.

"What was that all about?" David asked.

"Alexandra is taunting Darla," Anna told him, in a disapproving tone.

"And how does that help me?" David demanded. "You know what? This crazy idea of yours was stupid to begin with. I can't believe you talked me into it."

"Are you breaking up with me?" Alexandra asked.

David flushed again, and sputtered, missing the twinkle in her eyes. Anna groaned and shook her head.

Stares and whispers followed her the rest of the week, especially when she was with David. Last year, the constant rumors and whispering about her had annoyed her, and gotten her into a few fights. Now, however, she found it amusing.

JROC drills that week were not nearly as much fun. Maximilian didn't speak to her much, and when he did, he was harsh and abrupt, upbraiding her for small deficiencies in her uniform, or being too slow to draw her wand. On Wednesday, he Disarmed her forcefully enough to numb her hand, after about a dozen repetitions.

"Back to bullying me when I don't do what you want?" Alexandra muttered, just loudly enough for her brother to hear, as she picked up her wand. She stood up and glared at him defiantly. "Should I be looking out for trees again?"

His face twitched, and he looked like he was about to say something. Then Witch-Corporal Hawthorne walked over and said, "That's enough, Quick. We're done for today." When Maximilian looked at her and started to protest, she shook her head, and caught Maximilian's hand in a way Alexandra found interesting.

"Go on. Broom, Alex," Beatrice ordered. Alexandra blinked at the informality, looked at the older girl for a moment, and then left.

Friday night, Alexandra joined her friends again to play Heart of Three Kingdoms. She continued to dominate the game. Constance and Forbearance surprised her at how savagely they attacked each other – Constance built a fortress of Water, Wood, and Air that almost fell to Forbearance's mountain of Fire tiles, but then Alexandra smashed both of their stacks apart with her Metal onslaught. David and Anna finally joined forces to try to hold her off, but she was about to overwhelm them both when David muttered, "Uh oh."

"Yeah, you should never have put down Wood when you knew I could surround you there with Fire." Alexandra smirked, as a few more of David's tiles smoldered and burst into flames.

"No, it's your brother," David said.

Alexandra turned around, to see Maximilian standing at the door of the recreation room. Technically anyone was allowed in any common area, but students tended to socialize with their own grade level, so Maximilian was the only eleventh grader in a room full of younger students.

“Double uh oh,” David said, when they saw that Darla and Angelique were with him. Darla was whispering something to Maximilian. He was watching Alexandra – and David – and only half-paying attention to Darla. He nodded to her, and then walked over to the table where the five seventh graders were playing.

“Alexandra,” he said in a calm, controlled tone. “I want to speak to you.”

She turned away from him and carefully conjured another row of Metal tiles to attack Anna with. “I’m playing a game.”

There was an awkward silence, then he spoke again. “All right, I’ll wait until you’re done.”

He walked over to take a seat by the Wizard Wireless. A pair of seventh grade boys scrambled to move away from him. Alexandra glanced over her shoulder, frowning. Darla immediately went over to sit next to him, while Angelique drifted over to the table.

“What are y’all playing?” she asked.

“Heart of Three Kingdoms,” replied Anna.

Angelique wrinkled her brow. “Never heard of it.”

“It’s Chinese. It’s a really cool game,” David told her, a little too eagerly. “You could join us!”

“We’re in the middle of it!” Constance protested, even though her tiles had been all but demolished.

“It’s your turn, Alexandra,” said Forbearance.

Alexandra was still watching Darla and Maximilian. Darla was leaning forward and putting her hand on Maximilian’s knee. He was barely paying attention to her, but it annoyed Alexandra nonetheless. So did Maximilian’s presence here. Forbearance and then Anna had to

repeat themselves to catch her attention. She finally turned back to look at them, and a wicked smile curled her lips.

“Why don't you teach Angelique to play?” she suggested. “She can take over my tiles.”

Angelique looked uncertain, and not all that enthusiastic, but Alexandra rose from her seat and nudged Angelique towards it. And then, with slow deliberation, she walked around the table until she was standing next to David, and she was sure Maximilian was watching.

“See you later, David,” she said, and she bent over to place a kiss right on David's mouth.

He froze. Alexandra had her lips pressed tightly together, and after his initial gasp of surprise, so did David. It wasn't really much of a kiss. But when she stood up, she saw that everyone in the room was staring at them. A few of the boys whistled and cheered, until Maximilian glared at them. Constance and Forbearance's mouths had dropped open, while Anna looked stunned.

Alexandra barely noticed Angelique's reaction. She was looking at Maximilian, whose expression was severe and disapproving, though he said nothing.

With her head held high, she sauntered over to the couch where he and Darla sat.

“Okay,” she said. “What do you want to talk about?”

Maximilian sat up, cleared his throat, and looked at Darla, then back at her. “Not here.”

“Fine,” Alexandra replied curtly. She gave Darla a disdainful look, as Maximilian stood up.

“Good evening, Darla,” he said politely.

“Good night, Max.” She smiled. “Alex,” she added, in a cooler tone.

Alexandra frowned at her, and then followed Maximilian out of the rec room.

In the hallway outside, she spoke first. "If you're just going to give me another lecture about being too young to date, and how I should find a pureblood to marry, then save it."

"Do you really care for him?" Maximilian asked.

She stopped walking and looked at her brother in surprise. He looked back at her seriously.

"David? Yeah, sure, he's my f – I mean, of course I care for him! He's my boyfriend!" She folded her arms defiantly.

He studied her a moment, then nodded, and continued walking. Alexandra paused, then followed.

Maximilian didn't say anything, as they walked down the hallway, lined by locked classrooms and, occasionally, other rooms where students were studying or playing games or reading. They walked through the large entrance foyer at the front of the academy, and Alexandra looked around at all the photographs and paintings of past staff and alumni looking down at them from the walls, before Maximilian proceeded towards the front doors.

It was after curfew for underclass students, but Alexandra followed her brother anyway. He only went as far as the front steps. Even in the absence of snow, it was freezing cold outside, and none of the other older students were out and about. Maximilian pointed his wand at the stone steps at their feet and muttered something before sitting down. He looked up at Alexandra and patted the step next to him. Cautiously, she sat down, and found that his charm had warmed the stone, so it was comfortable to sit on.

"I don't like it when you're angry at me, Alexandra."

She frowned, caught off-guard. "Then don't make me angry!" she retorted.

Maximilian smiled thinly. "I don't try to. I still think you're too young to date. But if you and that boy are happy together, and he respects you, you should enjoy it while you can."

Alexandra looked at him in confusion.

"Just please tell me you're not doing anything more than kissing him," Maximilian muttered.

"No!" Alexandra exclaimed. She felt her face turning warmer than the stone step she was sitting on. "Of course not!"

"Good." He nodded. He stared off silently across Charmbridge's grounds.

"What made you change your mind?" she asked cautiously, after several seconds.

He sighed. "Beatrice told me I was being an arrogant, overbearing, overprotective ass, and that I can't control who you're smitten with, and that a little adolescent Amortentia is harmless."

Alexandra blinked, and frowned. "I told you that," she pointed out. "Well, not in those words. But I did." She'd have to look up 'Amortentia' later.

Maximilian smiled. "Yes, but Bea is seventeen. You're twelve."

"Almost thirteen. Jerk."

He turned to look at her, and grinned at her indignant scowl.

"Yes," he agreed.

"You're only sixteen, you know. That doesn't make you an adult."

He nodded, looking amused rather than offended.

"I really will date whoever I want. And marry whoever I want. Even a Muggle!"

"Yes," he sighed. "I wager you will. I hope you stay this willful and defiant, Alex."

"You don't seem to like it when I'm willful and defiant."

He smiled – a little sadly, she thought. She studied her brother, in the light cast by the windows behind them. At times like this, she was sure he was thinking about things he hadn't shared with her. She still found Maximilian complicated and confusing.

"Is Beatrice your girlfriend?" she asked.

He started, then laughed and shook his head. "No. We're just friends."

"Oh." She frowned, looked down at the stone at her feet, and confessed, "David and I are just friends, too. We're not really dating. I don't like him that way."

"What?" Maximilian exclaimed. He stared at her.

"It was all just a game, to make Angelique think David likes me."

"Angelique Devereaux? Why?"

"Because David likes her, duh!" She looked back at him. "So I figured if Angelique thinks David likes me, she'd be jealous, and then she'd like David, and..."

Maximilian burst out laughing.

"What?" she snapped.

"Merlin! Only seventh graders would hatch a plan like that!" he guffawed. "Did you actually think that would work?"

Alexandra felt her face coloring again. "Well, it does on TV!" she said defensively. "And Angelique is stuck up and thinks she's better than me, so it has to drive her crazy that David likes me better – stop laughing!" Maximilian was now clutching his sides and shaking with laughter. With difficulty, he caught his breath and sat up straight again, shaking his head.

"That's quite a scheme, Alex. I suppose I should be glad you didn't just try to slip her some Pitter-Pat Candy." He smiled at her, looking much more relaxed and cheerful than a few minutes ago – relieved that his sister didn't actually have a boyfriend, she supposed, glaring back at him resentfully. His smile faded, as his expression became more serious. "But the Devereauxs are one of the oldest and most powerful wizarding families in New Orleans. They wouldn't approve of their daughter dating a Muggle-born either."

Alexandra shook her head. "All this wizarding society stuff is stupid."

"You're right. A lot of it is. But it's there. You can't ignore it just because you don't like it."

She frowned. The two of them sat together quietly for a while. At last, she asked, "Is that why our father wants to start a revolution? Because of all these stupid prejudices?"

Maximilian looked at her, and then cautiously patted her knee.

"That may be part of it," he said quietly. "But I don't think a revolution will change people's hearts. And you shouldn't worry about what Father is planning. You don't want to be involved, and I'm sure he doesn't want you to be. I don't want you to be." He squeezed her knee, and then let his hand fall back to his side.

She sighed, and rolled her eyes in the dark winter night. There he went again, thinking it was his job to 'protect' her! She didn't need or want Maximilian's protection. But after a moment, she leaned her head against his shoulder. He didn't move away, and they sat there on the steps as a few snowflakes began drifting down from the sky.

Charlie the Thief

“Accio broom!”

The broom sitting atop a log by the riverbank wobbled, and then fell off, where it lay unmoving on the cold, hard ground. Alexandra held her wand out at arm's length, willing the broom to keep coming towards her, but it didn't. After several seconds of futile effort, she groaned in frustration and dropped her arm to her side.

It was late January, and the ground was covered with a thin layer of snow, from the flurries that had fallen the day before yesterday. The winter had been mild so far; cold but unusually dry. Maximilian, Martin, and Beatrice had brought Alexandra down to the river again for more dueling, but so far she had spent most of the afternoon practicing Summoning Charms.

“Well, at least you pulled it in the right direction that time,” said Beatrice. She and Martin were growing impatient.

“Yeah. Big deal. I could have done that with a Levitation Charm.” Alexandra stared at the broom angrily, as if it were to blame for lying inertly on the ground, like a broom.

Maximilian clapped her on the shoulder. “I told you, most students don't learn Summoning Charms until tenth grade. Just because they seem simple doesn't mean they're easy.”

Alexandra pointed her wand again, and repeated, “Accio broom!” in a louder voice. The broom shivered, but didn't move.

“You can't pester it into obeying you.” Maximilian didn't even raise his wand, as he said, “Accio broom!” The broom leapt off the ground and flew into his other hand. Alexandra scowled at him.

“You could practice this indoors, you know,” Beatrice suggested. “Not that watching your little sister try to move a broom isn't a thrilling way to spend an afternoon.”

“Fine.” Maximilian cut her off, as Alexandra flushed. “How about boys against girls?”

Martin chortled. “Boys rule the sky, girls prepare to die!” He summoned his own broom to his hand, while Maximilian tossed Alexandra's to her.

Beatrice rolled her eyes and snorted. “Great, Martin. We're back in sixth grade.” All four of them got on their brooms, and rose into the air.

They all knew, of course, that the boys were going to rule the sky, at least in this contest. Beatrice was good, but Maximilian was better, and Alexandra was no match for any of the older teens. So the girls were at a serious disadvantage. They had just started dueling on brooms – something that was strictly forbidden without adult supervision, and which a seventh grader would never be allowed to do anyway. The Stormcrows had all gone easy on Alexandra so far, and she expected that Martin and her brother would be holding back a little now, too.

She expected wrongly. As soon as she and Beatrice wheeled about to face the boys, they were gone.

“Below!” Beatrice cried out, and rolled aside to duck a hex that Maximilian sent sizzling in her direction from underneath her. Alexandra didn't even look, just dived, and almost flew into Martin ascending from below. This interrupted his attempt to jinx her, but almost caused them to collide fifty feet above the ground. Martin cursed as he rolled out of the way, and shouted, “Watch where you're going, Troublesome!”

She responded by throwing a Strangling Scarf Curse at him. He gagged and tore away the scarf around his neck, which was suddenly constricting like a noose. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw flashes and pops where Maximilian must be engaging Beatrice.

“Okay, want to play rough, Quick?” Martin grinned, and said, “Accio broom!”

Alexandra yelled as her broom suddenly spun out of control, flying towards Martin. She couldn't stop it, so instead, she leaned forward and accelerated, adding to the broom's velocity as Martin's Summoning Charm yanked her towards him. His face turned white and he dropped out of the sky, barely falling out of the path of broom and girl, both of whom were tumbling erratically through the air.

"You lunatic!" he shouted, as Alexandra laughed. It took her several seconds to regain control of her broom. No sooner had she done so than she was walloped from behind by a hex that stung her entire backside and knocked the breath out of her. Wheezing, she spiraled towards the ground and almost fell off her broom before she'd even touched down, and lay there, groaning, too numb to move.

Martin landed nimbly next to her, with a smirk.

"Think about your next move before you try crazy stunts like that," he gloated.

With a shriek, Beatrice came plummeting out of the sky, without her broom.

"Levicorpus!" Maximilian shouted from above, and Beatrice suddenly jerked to a halt in midair, dangling upside down. Her chestnut hair had come loose from its tight bun, and was almost dragging on the ground. A second later, her broom hit the ground ten feet from her and bounced.

Maximilian landed, sprung off his broom, and looked at Alexandra. "You all right?"

"I'm fine," she mumbled, though her back and butt were getting cold, lying on the ground. With an effort, she sat up.

"What about me?" Beatrice demanded. "Get me down!"

Maximilian grinned at her, reached out to take her hand, and waved his wand. "Liberacorpus."

Beatrice somersaulted in mid-air, with Maximilian's help, and landed on her feet, then stumbled a little.

"You almost killed me," she accused.

"Never, Bea." Maximilian squeezed her hand, then released it.

She staggered over to where Alexandra was sitting, and leaned against a cold, dry rock that didn't have any ice or snow on it.

"Do the girls need to take a rest?" Martin asked mockingly.

"Yes, the girls do," Beatrice snapped, before Alexandra could object. She was clutching her side, and her face was – literally – green.

"Come on, Martin. One on one." Maximilian swung onto his broom, and rose into the air again. Martin smirked at the two girls and followed.

Alexandra struggled to her feet, and looked at Beatrice, who had turned greener.

"Seasickness Curse," she gasped. "Your brother fights dirty." And she turned around to throw up. Alexandra winced, watching the other girl heave violently. After a minute, Beatrice stood up, and wiped her mouth with the back of her sleeve. She sighed and sat back down on the rock, while she picked up one of the water bottles they'd brought along.

"Do you ever win?" Alexandra asked.

Beatrice smiled. "Sometimes. Less and less often, the last couple of years." She took a large gulp of water, and then several more.

Alexandra sat down next to her, and studied the junior. Beatrice Hawthorne was not particularly pretty, but she was athletic and very shapely, which boys seemed to like. When not in uniform, she usually wore waistcoats or petticoats and long skirts; today she had on knee-high leather boots and leggings beneath a long brown skirted overcoat.

"You really like Max?" Alexandra asked her.

The older girl gave her an odd look. "We're friends, Alex. We've been friends since we were eleven."

"But you've never, like, dated?"

Beatrice raised an eyebrow. "Not that this is any of your business, but no. It wouldn't work, between us."

"Why not?"

The other witch looked off into the sky. Maximilian and Martin had disappeared over the trees, apparently engaged in an aerial chase. Alexandra would have liked to see Martin sent flying into a tree.

"My family wouldn't approve, for one thing," Beatrice replied at last.

"Why not?"

Now Beatrice looked annoyed. She gave Alexandra a disapproving frown. "If you want to know about your brother's romantic affairs, you really should ask him."

"He probably won't tell me. But he butts into mine. I mean, not that I have any."

Beatrice smiled thinly. "You mean besides your boyfriend?" Alexandra turned a little red. "I heard about your clever little scheme. So, how is that going?"

Alexandra shrugged. "I haven't really talked to David much outside of class, the last couple of weeks." On the other hand, she hadn't seen him spending much time with Angelique either.

Beatrice chuckled. Alexandra waited for her to stop, then pressed on. "So your family wouldn't approve of you dating Max, because he's Abraham Thorn's son?"

The other girl sighed, and nodded. "Yes."

"Why would you let your family tell you who you can date?" She felt inexplicably disappointed. Beatrice was brash, and bold, and as tough as any of the boys. Alexandra didn't think she was the sort of person to let other people tell her what she could do. But the eleventh grader looked at her in exasperation.

"It's easy to say you'll do as you please when you're twelve. I said the same thing, believe me. But when you get old enough that you have to start thinking seriously about your future, what your family and society thinks starts to matter."

Alexandra shook her head. "I'll never let anyone tell me what to do like that."

"No? I hope that's true."

Alexandra scowled, looking up into the cold, gray winter sky. A figure on a broom came zooming above the treetops, heading in their direction.

"Go easy on Max," Beatrice said softly. "It really does bother him when you get angry at him. He wants you to trust him, and respect his opinion." Alexandra's forehead creased, and she opened her mouth, but Beatrice went on. "I know he can be overbearing. I think he'd drive me crazy if I were his little sister, too. But he loves Julia, and his mother, more than anything else in this world."

Alexandra turned her head to look at Beatrice, and the older girl gazed back at her seriously.

"He'll do anything to protect them," Beatrice told her. "And you, too, I'll wager."

Alexandra looked away, then watched as the figure on the broom resolved itself into two – Maximilian, holding onto Martin, as they both flew on Maximilian's broom. Martin was moving very strangely – his arms kept jerking in odd directions, and his head was twisting around at an impossible angle. His clothes were also quite a bit worse for

wear, torn and scorched. Maximilian had a few light cuts and scrapes along his face, as if he'd been scratched by tree branches.

"Looks like Max rules the sky again," Beatrice sighed. Maximilian set Martin down, leaning against the rock Beatrice and Alexandra had been sitting on, and pulled a potion out of his pocket.

"You knew you were going to use that curse on me!" Martin complained, as he tried to point a finger at his friend and wound up jabbing it into the rock. His knees twitched and bent sideways. He resembled a broken marionette.

Maximilian grinned as he poured the potion into Martin's mouth. "Just sit still and drink this." The other boy gagged, and made an awful face as he forced himself to swallow the antidote to Maximilian's curse.

Alexandra liked seeing Martin humiliated. She thought he was smug and condescending, and she still thought he'd been cruel to Darla, though he insisted that any 'flirtations' had been entirely in Darla's mind.

They were all becoming chilly by the time Martin was able to stand again. As they prepared to return to Charmbridge, Charlie descended from the sky and landed on the end of Alexandra's broom.

"So what exactly is a raven familiar good for, since it won't deliver messages?" Martin asked.

"Big fat jerk," said Charlie.

Beatrice burst into laughter. Alexandra snickered, and even Maximilian smiled.

Alexandra's amusement faded when she saw that there was something in the raven's beak. "What do you have now, Charlie?" she asked. Charlie hopped back out of reach when Alexandra reached for the bird.

"Charlie! Give it here!" she ordered.

“Accio jewelry,” said Maximilian. The shiny object flew from the bird's beak and into his hand.

“An earring,” he observed, shaking his head. “I hope the owner wasn't wearing it when Charlie took it.” He tossed it to Alexandra, who caught it and looked at the small silver earring, then at her familiar.

“I told you to stop stealing things, Charlie!” she scolded.

Charlie cawed and took off, flapping away into the sky.

“Better get your familiar under control, or you'll be required to keep it locked up,” Martin warned.

“How do you control a raven? Charlie only listens to me sometimes,” Alexandra replied.

“I know the feeling,” Maximilian commented.

Alexandra gave him a dirty look, while behind her, Martin and Beatrice snickered, as they mounted their brooms and flew out of the valley.

Alexandra kept a closer eye on Charlie for the next few days, and even tried looking up charms to prevent thievery in the library. Unfortunately, most anti-thief charms were only useful for protecting objects from being stolen, and her problem was that she couldn't know what Charlie might steal ahead of time. Bran and Poe helpfully found her a book on 'beast training,' but Alexandra found that it mostly taught how to use punishing curses. She was appalled by the idea of putting a curse on her familiar that would inflict pain every time it stole something. She wondered what kind of a wizard would do something like that.

She looked at the little card in the back of the book, showing who had checked it out last, and found Angelique Devereaux's signature. She sighed and shook her head, glad that Darla had not discovered this book. Just that morning, she'd heard Honey calling Darla some particularly foul names. Angelique might be a spoiled princess, but at least she wasn't willing to use Dark magic.

With Maximilian no longer harassing her about David, JROC drills became less arduous, and even fun at times. There was still a lot of boring routine, and endless drills and uniform inspections, but Ms. Shirtliffe let them fly impromptu air skirmishes to practice the maneuvers they'd learned the previous semester. It was a lot like the wizard-dueling Alexandra had been doing with Maximilian and his friends, except less intense. Alexandra thought of it as a game, though Shirtliffe insisted that they treat the little balls of light they were shooting from their wands to simulate offensive spells as if they were the real thing.

With JROC and classwork taking up most of her time, Alexandra almost forgot she was supposed to have a 'boyfriend.' She and David talked every day in class, but David was involved in his ASPEW activities or Quidditch practice after school, while Alexandra, when not studying with Anna or being tutored in magic by her brother, was more likely to be playing games in the rec room.

Thus, she was caught off-guard when David approached her after dinner one evening and said, "I think we should break up."

She blinked. "Okay." Then she grinned. "Dumping me for Angelique, a week from Valentine's Day? Nice timing."

David didn't smile back. "I don't think Angelique fell for it. She's hardly talking to me at all."

"Oh. Sorry." Alexandra was actually more sorry that she was going to have to listen to her brother saying, 'I told you so,' than she was for David.

"Actually, none of the girls are talking to me, and a lot of the boys aren't either. Constance and Forbearance don't approve, Anna thinks we're being idiots, and all the other kids in our class..." He paused.

"What about them?" Alexandra asked.

"I think they're afraid of you," David muttered.

Alexandra raised an eyebrow. "Oh." She wasn't sure how she felt about that.

"So anyway, you can stop telling people I'm your boyfriend."

"I haven't been telling people you're my boyfriend, actually. I think the kiss was enough."

"Yeah." David coughed and looked away uncomfortably.

"So, do you want to have a fight? I'll even let you be the one who breaks up with me," Alexandra offered magnanimously.

"Actually, I am the one breaking up with you," David pointed out.

"Whatever. But no accusing me of sneaking around behind your back with other guys."

"What?" David exclaimed, staring at her. "Girl, you watch way too much TV when you're at home!" He shook his head. "No more drama. I don't want to tell people we had a fight. Let's just go back to being friends."

"Okay," Alexandra agreed. And impulsively, she leaned forward, and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "You weren't bad, for my first boyfriend."

"Knock it off!" David blushed a little and made a half-hearted attempt to push her away. She grinned at him, and then walked away, pausing when she saw Darla ahead of her, at the bottom of the stairs leading up to Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall.

She didn't say anything, just gave the other girl a challenging look as she approached, and took a certain amount of wicked satisfaction in seeing Darla back away and let her go up the stairs first.

When David joined the girls that weekend to play Wizardopoly, he was greatly relieved that Constance and Forbearance were no longer snubbing him. But he was still complaining.

“Everyone still thinks I'm your boyfriend! Even though I said we broke up. It's like I've been marked or something,” he grumbled, as he pulled a card from the mouth of a little pewter gargoyle and moved his piece.

“Property of Alexandra Quick,” Anna giggled, amused.

Constance shook her head, while Forbearance looked smug. “What your wand works can't be undone with words,” Forbearance informed him.

“I didn't work anything with my wand!” David protested.

Alexandra wasn't sure why the Pritchards were blushing suddenly, but Constance stammered, “It's just a sayin'!”

“Stupid saying,” David muttered. “I just wanted Angelique to like me.”

“How do you know she don't?” Forbearance asked.

“I dunno.” David shrugged.

Constance shook her head. “If you want sooth what someone's feelin', David Washington, you oughter ask her! Not play triflin' games.”

“Are you going to be like this from now on?” Anna demanded. “Seventh graders shouldn't be obsessed with dating and who wants to kiss who! It's bad enough that it's all the older kids ever talk about!”

“So you ain't sweet on no one?” Constance asked Anna.

“No!” Anna snapped, looking annoyed, as she handed some gold to a small brass goblin, and two more castles rose on the Wizardopoly board. “Are you?” The Pritchards blushed and stammered denials, and everyone changed the subject.

Alexandra thought that was the end of it, until the next day, when David came to her after class, with a strange look on his face.

"Did you tell Darla we broke up?" he asked.

"No," Alexandra replied. "Why would I tell her that?"

"She kissed me."

Alexandra blinked, and frowned, trying to read David's expression. She wasn't quite sure whether he was bragging or complaining.

"So?" she said finally.

He shook his head. "There's something wrong with that girl."

"What do you mean?"

She was confused by David's uncomfortable, almost scared expression. "It was the way she kissed me."

"What way?"

He looked away, and rubbed his mouth with his hand. He didn't answer directly. "She didn't like it when I said I didn't like her like that."

"You didn't make a crack about skinny white girls, did you? Not that Darla is skinny –" Her voice trailed off, when she saw how disturbed David was.

"She was pissed," he said.

"Well, what do you want me to do about it?" Alexandra demanded. "Go beat her up for trying to kiss my ex-boyfriend?"

"This ain't funny," David said. "That girl is messed up. I think you'd better watch your back, Alex. She already tried to kill you once."

"She wasn't really trying to kill me. Darla is an idiot, and so are you if you're afraid of her."

David sighed and shook his head as Alexandra stalked off. The next time she saw him, he was in the infirmary.

David's friends heard from his roommate at breakfast that he'd woken up that morning with his body breaking out all over, and that by the time he got dressed, he could barely move. Alexandra didn't know how an outbreak of acne could send someone to the infirmary, but she went there before class, with Anna and the Pritchards in tow. Now she was staring at David, lying on his back in bed, with covers pulled up to his chin. Only his face was visible, but that was enough.

"That's..." She was at a loss for words.

Next to her, Anna said, "Revolting."

David's face and head, down to his neck and below, was an enormous, bubbling mass of oozing, red and purple pimples.

"Thanks," he whispered.

Alexandra's eyes flashed. "Darla did this!" she hissed, while David winced.

Constance burst into tears. Forbearance, equally wide-eyed and horrified, patted her sister on the back.

"There's no need for that, Miss Pritchard," said Mrs. Murphy, as she brought over a jar full of smelly, pungent lotion. She looked at Alexandra. "What do you mean, 'Darla did this'?"

Alexandra shuffled uneasily. She knew someone had to do something about Darla, but she was no snitch. She hadn't meant to blurt that out while Mrs. Murphy was coming.

Everyone else was staring at her, and Mrs. Murphy said, "Miss Quick, this is the worst case of the Pustulant Pimples Curse I have ever seen. Someone is throwing around curses they ought not to even know, let alone cast. Now, do you want to tell me what you know, or shall we go directly to the Dean's Office, where she can pry it out of you?"

Alexandra sighed. "Are you going to tell her, or should I?" she asked David. He groaned and shook his head.

She took a breath, realizing how awkward it was going to be to explain Darla's jealousy of her pretend-boyfriend. She saw Anna and the Pritchards looking at her in a way that made her feel even worse, as if somehow she and David had provoked this with their little game.

"David and I were kind-of, not really, a couple," she stammered. "And Darla thought we really were, and she was jealous and she tried to kiss David, but he said he didn't like her that way, and that made her angry, so she did this to get back at him. And me."

Mrs. Murphy paused, in the process of scooping some of the pungent goop into the palm of her hand. She looked at David. "I couldn't even follow all that, but is this true, Mr. Washington? Did Darla Dearborn curse you?"

"Maybe," he mumbled. "Dunno." Even his tongue, Alexandra noted, with horrified fascination, was covered in grotesque pimples.

"Do you have any actual evidence that it was Miss Dearborn? This is a powerful curse for a seventh grader to cast."

David made a muffled sound in the negative.

Alexandra frowned. Maybe the time had come to tell someone about the Mors Mortis Society. Except that Maximilian had pleaded with her to keep quiet about it. But he'd also promised no one would be hurt, and now Darla was cursing her friends. Her frown deepened. She didn't know what to do.

"I'll talk to Dean Grimm," said the nurse. "Now, you girls will have to go."

"Will he be all right, ma'am?" Constance asked quietly.

"Mr. Washington will recover, though his complexion will take a while to return to normal."

"How long a while?" Anna asked.

"Oh, a few weeks," she replied. David made a croaking sound. The nurse set the jar on a tray next to David's bed. "Now, since Mr. Washington is unfortunately afflicted all over his body, I'm sure he'd appreciate it if you leave now."

David made an angry, strangled noise of protest, and the four girls blushed and hurried out of the infirmary.

"Do you really think Darla did this?" Anna whispered when they reached the hallway.

"Yes." Alexandra nodded.

"All on account o' you'un's feistin' around!" Forbearance accused.

Alexandra flinched. She wasn't sure it was entirely fair to blame her for Darla cursing David, but she was very conscious of how she'd put her friends in danger in the past.

"Well, if Darla did do it, she'll be expelled," said Anna. "She's already on probation." She looked at Alexandra. "You weren't planning to do something to Darla yourself, were you?"

"Of course not," Alexandra replied, in a way that convinced no one.

"Don't start no fractions," Constance pleaded.

"Or conjure no curses yourself," Forbearance admonished.

"Let Ms. Grimm handle it," Anna begged.

"Fine," Alexandra scowled. And she waited.

It was Darla who confronted her that evening, in their suite. She thumped on the door between their bedrooms until Alexandra opened it, and as a startled Anna and a frightened Angelique looked on, Darla pointed a finger accusingly in Alexandra's face.

“Did you tell Dean Grimm I cursed David?”

“You did,” Alexandra snapped back at her.

“I did not! How dare you accuse me like that?”

“We both know you did it, and why.” Alexandra scowled at her, but Darla shook her head, and held up her wand.

“Dean Grimm examined my wand,” she sneered, “and cast Prior Incantato on it.” She looked smug. “And I was proven innocent. You think you can go around accusing me of everything, just because of one mistake? My uncle, who's a Congressman, is going to make Dean Grimm apologize –”

“We'll see who apologizes,” Alexandra shot back, “when I tell Dean Grimm about the Mors Mortis Society.”

Anna sucked in a breath. Angelique's eyes went wider than they already were. Darla stared at her, and then stepped closer to Alexandra, until they were practically nose to nose.

“Maybe you'd better talk to your brother first,” she hissed. “Because I promise, if I get expelled, that's the least that will happen to Max!”

Alexandra's eyes narrowed.

“Get out of our room,” she growled, in a very low voice.

Darla swallowed, and tried to look dignified as she retreated. Alexandra slammed the door shut in her face, and turned to look at Anna.

“What are you going to do?” Anna asked.

“Talk to Max,” Alexandra replied.

She did, the next day, after JROC drill. She and Maximilian were still in uniform, so she followed him to the equipment locker as he put away their brooms.

“Darla probably didn't do it,” he said. “She's not good enough, for one thing, and she knows she'd be caught, for another.”

“So she had someone else do it for her.” Alexandra watched her brother store their brooms. “Do you know who?”

“No. If I'd heard her talking about cursing someone, Alex, do you think I would have done nothing?”

Alexandra hesitated, for a fraction of a second, and then shook her head. “No. But you must have some idea who did it now.”

Maximilian sighed. “Why did you and that boy have to play these stupid games in the first place?”

“That boy is my friend!” she retorted angrily. “And it's not his fault Darla's lost her mind!”

Maximilian turned around slowly, looking weary.

“It was John, wasn't it?” she asked. “Or maybe Wayne or Tony.”

Her brother was silent. Alexandra folded her arms across her chest. “If I have to go to Dean Grimm, I will. You promised no one would get hurt. You promised you'd turn them in yourself if they did anything to other students.”

“I don't know for sure that they have,” Maximilian replied.

“Okay. You want to be that way?” Alexandra started to march off, but he stopped her. He didn't grab her, but just laid his hand on her arm and gently caught hold of her jacket.

“I'll try to find out,” he promised.

“And then what? Whoever did this should be expelled, and Darla too, if she arranged it, which you know she did!”

Maximilian's face was almost impassive, but he had a troubled look in his eyes. “Is Washington going to be all right?” he asked.

“Other than having pizza-face for the next couple of weeks? Yeah.” She glared at him.

“Alexandra...”

“Oh, no. You're going to ask me to keep quiet and trust you, aren't you? You have your 'mission,' and expelling all those Dark dorks would ruin it!”

Her brother wore a pained expression now. “Darla acting like a spoiled, jealous child has nothing to do with her being in the Mors Mortis Society. She would have done something like this even without their help.”

“Yeah, but she wouldn't have gotten away with it!”

He looked down at her, and shook his head. “You do what you have to do, then, Alexandra,” he said slowly. “I'm not going to threaten you or plead with you, just like I wouldn't with Darla.” He let go of her sleeve.

She grabbed her hair with both hands, as if to pull it out. “You really drive me crazy!”

He raised an eyebrow.

She dropped her hands to her sides, and said, more plaintively, “I can't let my friends get cursed because of me.”

Maximilian blinked slowly, and then put both hands on her shoulders.

“It was Darla's fault, not yours. I'll see to it that she doesn't do anything like that again.”

“How are you going to do that?” she demanded, frowning.

“Trust me.”

She looked at him suspiciously. “Are you going to curse her?”

He shook his head, with a smile. “No. How big a bully do you think I am, Alex?”

Alexandra snorted, then grew more serious.

“David thinks there's something wrong with her. I don't think she should be in the Mors Mortis Society, Max. It's...” Alexandra frowned, realizing she was in the awkward position now of being worried about Darla. “It's not good for her.”

“I wish you'd listened earlier when I told you it wasn't good for you.”

She glared at him, and he held his hands up. “If my own sister won't mind me, do you really think Darla Dearborn will?”

“I'm serious, Max.”

“All right.” He nodded. “But so am I. I can't do much about Darla, other than make sure she stays away from you and your friends.”

Alexandra sighed.

“So can I assume David Washington will not be taking you to the Sweethearts' Dance?”

She glared at him again. He grinned a little.

“Are you going? Why don't you ask Beatrice?”

His grin disappeared. “I told you, Alex —”

“I know. You're just friends. 'Cause you're both stupid.”

He folded his arms across his chest. "Do you know what 'hypocrite' means?" he asked, rather crossly.

Alexandra flushed.

"Drop it, Alex. Bea and I are perfectly capable of finding dates, if we want, and if we don't, it's none of your business."

Alexandra would have liked to argue the point, but the accusation of being a hypocrite stung, so she dropped it, and watched as couples became even giddier and sillier than usual in the following week. The Sweethearts' Dance was open to all students, though sixth, seventh, and eighth graders were only allowed to stay through the first part of the evening, and not many went at all. None of Alexandra's friends were going; when Alexandra asked David, half-seriously, whether he was going to ask Angelique, he gave her an ugly glower, made even uglier by the angry red and purple bumps still splayed across his face.

The five of them played games throughout the evening. Alexandra heard afterwards that all the Stormcrows went to the dance together, and that Maximilian and Martin had danced with half the girls in school. From the sounds in the next room when she and Anna went to bed that night – angry screeching from Honey, sniping from Darla, and weary remonstrances from Angelique – it didn't appear that anyone had asked the other two girls either.

An icy state of detente existed between Alexandra and Darla. For the most part, they did not speak to each other, or even acknowledge one another. Alexandra's eyes narrowed dangerously whenever the other girl passed by, and Darla's eyes flashed in response, but they sat as far apart as they could, in the cafeteria and in class. Anna and Angelique, like small satellites trapped in the orbit of greater powers, tried to remain civil to all concerned, but it made for very tense mornings and evenings, when the four girls had to negotiate use of their shared bathroom.

David, his pock-marks and scars still not completely faded even by the end of February, declared that he was through with girls entirely.

“Except as friends,” he amended quickly, when Alexandra rolled her eyes at him. The two of them were out on the lawn, where David was exercising Malcolm. Alexandra knew Charlie was somewhere around, too, but was probably staying out of sight while the falcon flew overhead.

There was more snow on the ground now, though much less than last year. Maximilian hadn't taken her outside for dueling practice lately, and there were no more trips down into the river valley, so Alexandra had been spending more time playing games in the rec room, or reading books in the library and occasionally visiting with Bran and Poe. Today however, she'd decided to take a stroll, as it was a rather warm day despite the unmelted snow lying on the ground. Charlie had accompanied her until they ran into David and his familiar, whereupon the raven had hastily flapped away.

She waited outside a while longer, after David called Malcolm back to him, put a hood on the falcon, and carried him back to the aviary. Across the blanketed white lawn, she saw Darla walking with John Manuelito, back towards the academy. Where they had come from, she wasn't sure. Alexandra frowned, and then looked away and pretended not to notice them.

Charlie cawed and landed on a high wooden post used by the Quodpot players, a few yards away. Alexandra held her arm up. “Come on, scaredy-bird,” she said. “Malcolm's gone.”

Charlie cawed again, indignantly this time. Alexandra laughed, and then saw something gleaming in the bird's beak.

“Oh no,” she groaned. “Charlie, what do you have there?”

The raven hopped once, and regarded her smugly from beyond her reach. Alexandra frowned. It looked like a coin.

“Charlie,” she remonstrated, “I've told you a hundred times you can't just grab anything you see that's shiny!”

In response, Charlie's black wings stretched out in preparation to take off. Alexandra drew her wand and pointed it, and with a deep breath, said, "Accio coin!"

The raven flapped, fighting against the spell, and then almost toppled off the post before regaining its balance. But the coin flew from Charlie's beak, and spun through the air and into Alexandra's hand. She laughed triumphantly.

"Hah!" she crowed. "It worked! So there, bird-brain!"

"Big fat jerk," said Charlie.

She stuck her tongue out at the raven, then looked at the coin in her hand.

It was neither a Muggle coin, nor a Lion or Eagle or Pigeon. It wasn't an MMS coin either. It was made of silver, and looked very old. There was a sinister figure engraved on one side, some sort of bird-man with an angry, mask-like face. There was something that looked like a bundle of straw or sticks, above a flat-topped hill, etched on the other side. There were no letters or numbers anywhere.

"What the heck is this?" Alexandra muttered. She looked up at her familiar. "Where did you get this, Charlie?"

In response, Charlie took off, scolding her with loud, raucous caws.

"Bird-brain," she muttered, studying the coin. She stuck it in her pocket, made a face at her raven, who was now flying off over the woods, and would probably not return until sundown, and headed back inside.

When she returned to her room, she found her roommate looking rattled. Anna had been working quietly on an essay about the influence of magnetism on magic for her Geomancy class, so Alexandra had left her alone to go outside. Now, however, Anna was shaken, and Alexandra could hear Angelique sobbing in the next room.

“Stop blubbering, crybaby,” said Honey, but the jarvey's tone lacked its usual sharp edge. It almost sounded as if Honey were trying to sound consoling, and just didn't have the vocabulary.

“Darla freaked out,” Anna whispered, answering Alexandra's unspoken question. “She's missing a coin or something. I didn't hear her say what was so special about it, but she was screaming and accusing Angelique of taking it, and threatening to curse her and rip Honey's tongue out! I heard her tearing their room apart, and then she pounded on the door and yelled that she was going to kill us —” At Alexandra's sudden ominous scowl, Anna added quickly, “Don't worry, she didn't come in. I told her neither of us had seen any coin and wouldn't have taken anything of hers, and she, well, she shouted some more bad stuff, and then stormed off.” The smaller girl exhaled slowly. “She sounded...”

“Out of her mind?” Alexandra suggested.

Anna nodded.

Alexandra sighed, sat down on her bed, and ran a hand through her hair.

Now what have you done, Charlie? she groaned to herself.

The Obol

There was only one thing to do. As much as she hated it, Alexandra knew she had to return the coin to Darla.

"I'm going to find Darla," she said, walking back to the door.

"To do what?" Anna asked, alarmed.

"To find out why she's going berserk over a stupid coin," Alexandra replied, feeling a little guilty about only telling Anna half the truth. "And to make sure she isn't whipping up some new curse."

"I think you should just stay away from her," Anna said.

"Relax. I'm not going to hex her," Alexandra assured her friend, amending to herself: Unless she tries to hex me first. She looked at the bathroom door; from the other room, they could still hear Angelique sniffing and Honey griping. "Maybe you should check on Angelique," she suggested.

Anna looked at her dubiously, but Alexandra left the room, and set off in search of Darla.

Sonja Rackham told her she'd seen Darla storming down the stairs, so Alexandra headed that way. On the ground floor, none of the students she passed had seen the other girl. Alexandra wandered around a bit, checked the nearest exits and did not find Darla outside, and scratched her head.

She noticed one of the hall monitors hanging over the entrance to another dormitory hallway, and approached it.

"This is the senior boys' dorm, young lady," sniffed a pinch-nosed wizard with a tall, pointed hat. "And unlike some of my colleagues, I take my duties seriously! No girls are allowed past this point."

"Have you seen another girl my age?" she asked, in a much more polite tone than she usually used when talking to the school's portraits. "She's got black hair, wavier than mine, kind of pretty –"

"I just told you..." The wizard in the portrait paused. "Would this be the girl I chased away a few nights ago, when she was looking for Mr. Manuelito?"

"It might be," Alexandra replied slowly.

The wizard shook his head. "Shameful! Unchaperoned witches wandering around hallways after curfew, talking to boys! Why, in my day –"

"Have you seen her tonight?" Alexandra interrupted.

The painted wizard stopped talking, and looked down his nose at her irritably. "No!" he snapped. "Though Mr. Manuelito did pass by this way a few minutes ago. So perhaps where you find him, you will find her, I shudder to think. I have already informed Miss Marmsley, as I do every time I see students of the opposite sex fraternizing in the hallways without a proper chaperone, and she insists that she gives all of my reports to Dean Grimm, but you know, I don't think that woman appreciates – young lady!"

Alexandra was already walking away from the portrait, and trying to think of where John Manuelito and Darla might have gone. She went around the corner, and her eyes fell on a door to another stairwell, with stairs going both up and down.

A Mors Mortis Society meeting, she thought. Except – Maximilian had said he was studying for a Transfiguration test that night with Beatrice and Martin. Which meant either there was no Society meeting, or Maximilian had lied to her. Alexandra frowned, and looked left and right. A pair of sophomores were sitting on a bench down the hall, with books open on their laps, but Alexandra suspected they were just waiting for her to disappear so they could resume kissing. In the other direction, students walked past along the intersecting corridor every now and then, but no one was looking her way.

She walked casually over to the door, and turned her head just slightly so she could look over her shoulder at the couple behind her. They were already leaning closer towards one another, now that her

back was turned. She opened the door and slipped into the stairwell with as much stealth as she could manage.

She wondered why John and Darla would be meeting in the basement alone. There was an obvious answer, of course, but she didn't like it at all. Darla had just turned thirteen, and John was a senior!

Once she was standing at the top of the stairs leading to the basement, though, she realized that she had no business following them, even if her hunch was correct. She could hardly walk up to Darla in the middle of a Mors Mortis Society meeting and return her coin. And if Darla was doing things she shouldn't be with an older boy, that wasn't Alexandra's problem.

So she told herself, as she stared at the sign indicating that the Magic Band's locker was downstairs.

Common sense (and Anna's nagging voice in her head) told her to go back to her room and find Darla later. Curiosity, a suspicion that Maximilian might have lied to her, and uneasiness about Darla and what she might be up to, impelled her onward.

Alexandra took the stairs down, and paused as she looked around the upper basement level. She saw no one, and proceeded down the next, narrower flight of stairs. She reached a door at the bottom. There was a lower level still, but it wasn't accessible from here. Had Darla and John come this way? Could she follow them without being caught?

She took out her wand, and listened at the door. There was no sound. She opened it, and froze when it made a slight creak. Still no other sounds. The stone corridor, leading to ancient, forgotten classrooms (What was ever taught down here? she wondered) or old storage closets and plumbing, was completely dark.

Alexandra took one cautious step forward, then another. Lighting her wand seemed foolhardy – anyone else would know she was coming before she even turned a corner. She was not afraid of the dark, though the thought of discovering another Boggart did send

goosebumps running up and down her arms. She hoped there were no holes in the floor down here – she hadn't seen any on her previous visits. She put her hand out, and felt the rough stone wall, now even colder than it had been in the fall. In fact, it was very cold down here, and she wasn't wearing a jacket. She took a deep breath, and walked on.

Not sure what she hoped to accomplish, she decided she wasn't going to try to find her way to the third basement level; she'd only get lost. It would be embarrassing to be found by Em again. And being caught by the Mors Mortis Society would be worse. What would Maximilian do if he had to save her again?

Assuming he would, came an unbidden thought, which she quickly dismissed. Of course he would – but he'd be furious at her, for endangering his precious 'mission.' And besides, she shouldn't be putting herself in a situation where she needed her brother to save her.

She felt her way to the end of the corridor, and stood there in pitch darkness, with her hand gripping the corner of the inner wall. Continuing onward without light would be pointless; she'd be randomly stumbling around in the dark. Finally admitting to herself that this had been a bad idea to begin with, Alexandra started to turn around to feel her way back to the stairwell up to the upper basement level, when she heard voices.

It wasn't chanting, but the voices were muffled. Alexandra tiptoed in the direction of the sound, holding one hand blindly out in front of herself. Her fingers bumped against a wooden surface: a door. She felt around for the knob, and turned it, very slowly.

When she pulled the door open, wincing a little as the old wood rasped against its frame, she felt an even colder breeze blowing past her. And the voices were echoing from below. So, she was standing at the top of yet another stairwell, and the people talking were down in the lowest basement level.

“... please!” someone pleaded. It sounded like Darla.

The response was deeper, a male voice, and more muted. Alexandra couldn't make out the words.

She couldn't hear anyone else. Was it just the two of them? Darla and (presumably) John?

Alexandra's heart was beating faster as she took one careful step forward, then another, feeling for the top of the stairs with her feet. Still in complete darkness, she crept down the stairs, all of her concentration on the steps beneath her feet, and the voices echoing from below. Darla was still pleading, but Alexandra couldn't make out the words. Was the other girl in trouble? Alexandra gripped her wand tightly.

There was a bit of illumination casting shadows at the bottom of the stairwell, from a light source further away. Alexandra squatted, and cautiously peeked her head around the corner.

She saw two figures standing in one of the lowest basement's rock-hewn corridors, perhaps ten yards away. Both had light emanating from their wands. Alexandra could see Darla's face; the other figure was a tall shadow between them, with his back to the stairwell, but Alexandra had no doubt it was John Manuelito.

"...wasting my time," John grumbled, and started to turn around.

"There must be some other way!" Darla insisted.

John paused. "Even if I wanted to help you," he said, "I wouldn't without knowing what you're up to."

"Why do you care? I gave you gold!"

"And I gave you what you wanted."

"But it's gone!" Darla sounded as if she were crying. "I have to have it!"

"Do you have more gold?"

Alexandra could see Darla forcefully shaking her head, tossing her hair side to side as she did. "I gave you everything I had," she moaned, in a smaller voice.

"Too bad, then. Do you think there are piles of those things lying around? It was difficult enough for me to obtain one."

"You have to get me another one!" Her voice rose almost to a screech. Then she made a strangled sound, as John moved. Alexandra couldn't quite see, but it looked as if he had grabbed her.

Darla whimpered, as John said slowly, "If it was so important to you, you wouldn't have lost it!"

Alexandra raised her wand, trying to decide whether she should do something.

"It wasn't lost, it was stolen!" Darla whined.

"Doesn't matter," he growled. "I went to a lot of trouble to get it for you. Do you have any idea how illegal obols are? And you held onto it for less than a day. If someone else finds it, and it's traced back to either of us..."

Darla stumbled away from him, and stood there, shaking. Alexandra thought she was sobbing.

"Please," she whispered.

John stood there for several moments. "Why?" he demanded at last. "You've never explained why you want it."

"You didn't care, when I offered you a sackful of gold Lions!" Darla's voice was resentful, but John laughed.

"So get more gold from Daddy," he said mockingly.

She shook her head. "I can't." She looked up at him. "I know there are other ways to pass through to the Lands Below."

“Not for spoiled, unlearned little girls.” John's tone was still mocking.

“I can learn.”

John made a derisive sound. Darla stepped closer to him.

“I can,” she said. “And I can do whatever I have to.” Her voice was softer now, and Alexandra could barely hear her. She leaned forward a little more, turning her head so her ear was facing the couple, trying to catch what Darla was murmuring.

“Why?” John was asking, in a lower voice. “What makes it so important...” Alexandra missed the rest, as well as Darla's response. When she turned her head again, to look at them, she saw them standing closer together. Darla was looking up at John. The uneasy feeling in Alexandra's gut was redoubled. What was Darla up to? And what were they doing now?

Darla's eyes suddenly focused past John's shoulder. At her.

Alexandra gasped, at the same time Darla did, and then she jerked back into the shadows of the stairwell.

“Someone's there!” Darla screamed. “Someone was right there!”

Alexandra turned and ran up the stairs, only stumbling once despite the darkness. She hit the door at the top and opened it, as she heard footsteps at the bottom of the stairwell.

Light flared from John's wand, behind her, so she said, “Lumos!” and used the illumination from her own wand to light her path as she dashed back up the corridor towards the next set of stairs.

“Quick!” he heard John bellowing, much too close behind her.

She almost made it to the door leading to the stairs up to the main basement, when her knees suddenly went spongy and soft, and she tumbled forward. She barely got her hands up in time to avoid hitting the ground face-first, and the stone floor scraped against her palms. She rolled over and pointed her wand, but John said, “Feordupois!”

Alexandra's arm collapsed, and the back of her head hit the floor. Even her fingers were suddenly too heavy to lift. She couldn't move, and was helpless as John closed the distance between them with three more strides, and looked down at her, smirking.

Darla caught up a moment later, and stood behind John, staring at Alexandra breathlessly.

"What do you think you're doing?" John asked.

Alexandra glared at him, and didn't answer.

The senior pointed his wand at her. She felt a cold sweat break out, and suppressed a shiver.

"No big brother to save you this time," John taunted.

"If you do anything to me, he'll kill you," Alexandra said.

The older boy laughed. "Think so?" The laughter faded, and he frowned again. "Why were you spying on us?"

Alexandra's eyes were fixed on the point of his wand. "I saw Darla going downstairs with you," she answered. "I was curious. I didn't think there was a Mors Mortis Society meeting tonight."

Darla gasped in outrage, while John scowled.

"How much did you hear?" he demanded.

"Nothing. You were talking too low, and Darla was mumbling, except when she screamed about something being stolen." Alexandra hoped she sounded convincing.

John shook his head. "I don't believe you."

Alexandra tried not to flinch when he crouched and held his wand over her. She tried to control her breathing, and stay calm, but she knew that John and Darla could both see her eyes getting wide, and her chest rising and falling more quickly. She grunted as she tried to

lift herself off the ground, but John's spell held her as immobile as if he were sitting on top of her.

"Let me do it," said Darla.

John paused, and looked over his shoulder at the other girl. Darla's expression was cold, and her eyes looked dark and pupilless in the harsh shadows cast by the light at the end of her wand.

"You don't think I can really learn Dark Arts," said Darla. "You don't think I'm serious, even after everything I did to prove myself. I'll show you."

John stared at her for a moment, then stood up.

"Wait," he said, and muttered another spell. Then he turned to Alexandra and smiled. "The elves aren't going to hear you now. Neither will anyone else." He nodded to Darla. "Go ahead." He looked skeptical. Alexandra felt like she was going to be sick.

Darla's hand shook a little as she held out her wand.

"Darla," Alexandra whispered.

Darla swallowed, and said, "Crucio."

Alexandra cried out, as the first jolt of pain went through her. She clenched her teeth together, determined not to cry or whimper – and that's when she realized that the pain was almost bearable.

It hurt. It was like pins and needles prickling her all over, and it triggered memories of the first time she'd been tortured. Those memories sent spasms through her body, and filled her with nausea. But after the initial shock, Darla's Cruciatus Curse was merely unpleasant, compared to the agony that John had inflicted on her.

Not wanting either of them to realize this, however, she screamed, and squirmed as much as she was able to, with that magical weight holding her down. She cried out several more times for good measure, before John shouted, "What did you overhear?"

“Nothing!” she screamed. “Only what I told you!”

John let her squirm for a few seconds longer, then gestured at Darla, and the other girl lowered her wand. The hot prickly sensation faded, and Alexandra took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

“Do you want me to Crucio her some more?” Darla asked. Alexandra's eyes popped open.

John looked amused. “No.” He crouched next to Alexandra again, studying her. Alexandra glared at him hatefully.

“I hope you do tell your half-brother,” he said quietly, in a mocking voice. “I'd like to find out where his loyalties lie.” He fingered his wand. “He has quite a temper, your brother. I'll have to make sure I'm ready for him.”

“He'll kick your ass!” Alexandra spat.

John laughed softly. “Really? We'll see.” He stood again. “Coming?” He was addressing Darla now.

Darla looked down at Alexandra. “What about her?” She licked her lips. “She could tell on us.”

“If she were going to tell Dean Grimm about the Mors Mortis Society, I think she would have done it already. No, it's just her brother we have to worry about.” John's expression was malevolent. He reached a hand out, and cupped Darla's chin. “You surprise me,” he murmured, sounding bemused.

Darla didn't move. John dropped his hand. “She'll break free of the Deadweight Spell eventually,” he told her. “Before she starves to death, anyway. Probably before anyone comes looking for her.” He looked at the two girls, and shrugged. Apparently unconcerned about whether Darla followed him or not, he pushed open the door by Alexandra's head, and they both listened as he walked upstairs. His steps echoed and faded.

Darla knelt next to Alexandra, who still couldn't move, other than to twitch or turn her head slightly.

"Who's the nosy, busybody sneak now?" Darla sneered.

"This is the only way you could ever beat me," Alexandra sneered back. "With someone else holding me down for you. Wow, you're a really dangerous witch!"

"And you're a really stupid witch." Darla pointed her wand directly at Alexandra's nose. "I know I wasn't hurting you that badly." She spoke in a softer, more ominous tone. "Nice acting."

Alexandra stared at her.

"Would you like to find out how badly I can hurt you?" Darla whispered, still pointing her wand.

The two of them stared at each other for several long moments. Finally, Alexandra licked her lips, and rasped, "Darla..."

She saw the other girl's eyes gleam triumphantly. Darla waited expectantly, for her captive to beg or plead, but Alexandra just asked, "Why? Why are you doing this?"

Darla regarded her helpless classmate silently. Alexandra was still very conscious of the other girl's wand, poised threateningly over her nose, but she kept her eyes focused on Darla's face, as she continued. "Dark Arts, older boys... all of this, it's crazy! Look at what you've done to Angelique, and she's your best friend! Don't you think you're taking jealousy too far?"

Darla's eyes flashed. "Jealousy?" she hissed. "Oh, right, you think this is all because I'm jealous of you? Of course, everything is about you! The whole wizarding world revolves around Alexandra Quick!"

"I didn't say that!" Alexandra snapped.

"You," said Darla contemptuously, "are an ignorant little brat even your crazy failed Dark Lord father didn't want anything to do with!"

That's why he dumped you with Muggles and left you there! The only reason anyone thinks you're something special is because of him! But look at you! Not so special now, are you, you... you... Mudblood!"

Alexandra's mouth fell open. She stared at Darla, as shock and anger drained the blood from her face more quickly than fear had. "I didn't know you were such a –"

"You don't know anything!" Darla spat. She pressed the tip of her wand against Alexandra's forehead, and Alexandra couldn't help shuddering. "Except that I really can hurt you, if I want to."

The two of them stared at each other for several seconds. Alexandra's expression became hard and angry; Darla's was cold and spiteful. Then Darla rose to her feet.

"Stay away from me, Alex. Just leave me alone, don't talk to me, and don't open your big mouth about any of this."

Alexandra's eyes blazed. She wanted to snarl something back – threats, defiance, promises of vengeance – but she knew something was wrong with Darla. Maybe she really was crazy.

Darla tossed her head, and with one last haughty look, she followed John up the stairs, leaving Alexandra alone. Her wand had stopped glowing, so it became pitch black again after Darla left, and she was increasingly aware of the cold, too, as it began seeping into her bones. And still she couldn't move.

She didn't know how long she lay there. It might have been a few minutes, or hours. Several times she was tempted to scream for help, hoping John's muffling spell had worn off, but her pride had been horribly wounded already, and the thought of Em or another house-elf finding her like this, pinned helplessly against the floor by magic, was almost enough to bring tears to her eyes. She thought about Darla, as she squirmed and fought against the magic holding her down, and her rage grew. She would teach Darla a lesson! When she got free, she was going to find Darla and make her shiver in fear! Darla should know better than to think she could get away with this!

But by the time she finally was able to sit up – with great effort, as if there were still leaden weights attached to her arms and legs – Alexandra's fury had drained away from her, leaving only confusion and weariness behind. She was shivering with cold. Her teeth were chattering. Her body ached. It took a while longer before she could stand, and take one ponderous step after another up the stairs.

"It's past lights out, Miss Quick," said the warlock hanging at the entrance to Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall, as Alexandra shuffled past underneath him. It was just her luck that for once, he wasn't sleeping. She hadn't even thought about using a Freeze-Frame Spell.

"I know," she mumbled, not caring if he reported her. She opened the door to her room, and not surprisingly, found Anna still awake, and Charlie hopping about nervously, rather than sleeping inside the bird cage as usual at this hour.

The raven squawked: "Alexandra!" Anna jumped to her feet.

"I was worried about you!" Anna scolded. "I was just about to go looking for Max," she added, with a distasteful look.

"Don't have a cow, Anna," Alexandra sighed. "Did Darla come back?"

Anna nodded. "It's been quiet. Angelique doesn't know what her problem is, but she's worried about Darla. And..." Anna lowered her voice to a whisper. "She's scared of her, too."

"Anna," said Alexandra seriously. She sat down next to her roommate. "Stay away from Darla. She's lost it. She really has."

"What do you mean?" Anna's brow wrinkled with concern. "This is about the Mors Mortis Society, isn't it?"

"Kind of." Alexandra shook her head. "I don't know what her problem is either, but I know she's gone way too far." She bit her lip, while her gaze focused on somewhere past the wall. Anna stared at her.

"What's going on, Alex?" Anna shook her head. "You need to go to the Dean."

“And be a snitch?”

“This isn't about a few jinxes. If Darla's in trouble –”

“Darla can go to hell!” Alexandra snarled, with unexpected raw fury. She blinked rapidly, while Anna shrank away from her, eyes wide – and, for a moment, fearful.

Alexandra took a deep breath, and put a hand over Anna's. “I'm sorry, Anna.”

“What's going on?” Anna repeated softly. “What happened?”

Alexandra didn't want to lie to her friend. But she also couldn't tell her the truth. Not all of it. She looked at Anna, and whispered, “Max is involved.”

Anna's eyes widened even further. “With the Mors Mortis Society?”

Alexandra nodded, while silently hoping that Max wouldn't kill her.

“Alex –”

“He's not Dark, Anna. It's complicated. This is the second time I've told you more than I was supposed to. I don't want to get him in trouble.” She took a deep breath. “You have to trust me, like I'm trusting you. Please. I don't want to be caught between my brother and my best friend.”

Anna's expression softened. She looked torn, too.

“Do you trust him?” she asked quietly.

Alexandra nodded slowly.

Anna sighed, and shook her head. “All right, Alex.” She didn't look happy, but Alexandra threw her arms around the smaller girl, and gave her a hug. Anna hugged her back.

“Why can't you ever have a normal semester?”

Alexandra laughed softly.

She was no longer smiling when she crawled into bed, though. Her sleep was plagued with bad dreams – images of John, and Darla, holding wands over her, while she was tied down with hundreds of tiny ropes, like in a cartoon she'd once seen of Gulliver's Travels. She woke up several times in the night, stifling cries so she wouldn't wake Anna or Charlie.

The third time, she thought she heard a sound in the next room, and she pressed her ear to the wall. On the other side, someone in Darla and Angelique's room was also moaning in her sleep. Alexandra knew Darla's bed was closer to the wall, and the moans sounded close.

She wondered what Darla was having nightmares about, and then her heart hardened, as she rubbed her eyes. Darla had given her nightmares. Darla had tried to break her.

For Anna and Maximilian's sake, Alexandra wasn't going to retaliate. But she wouldn't forget. Darla really had gone too far, and this time Alexandra meant it. Darla Dearborn could go to hell for all she cared. And if Darla touched her or her friends again, there would be hell to pay.

Maximilian found her in the library the next day, while she was looking up 'obol.' She only had half an hour to spend in the library before she had to go serve detention – the Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall monitor had, in fact, reported her being out after curfew, and her name was on the seventh grade bulletin board the next morning. She got lectured by Dean Black, and had to make up a story about sneaking out on a dare. Dean Black didn't question this; her “troublesome” reputation actually helped her for once.

Then, of course, she was lectured that afternoon by Ms. Shirtliffe, who reminded her that JROC mages were expected to follow school rules and stay out of trouble, and that any more detentions might get her kicked out. This, Alexandra almost found amusing, since she'd

spent the previous semester wanting nothing more than to be kicked out of JROC.

She thought that was what Maximilian was going to talk about, but his face was much too somber for another lecture about uniforms and being out after curfew, and before either of them said a word, he cast his Muffliato charm.

She closed the encyclopedia in front of her, and regarded her brother with a neutral expression.

"Is there something you want to tell me?" he asked.

"That depends. What have you heard?" she replied.

His eyes narrowed. "I spoke to John Manuelito."

She felt herself tensing slightly, but kept her voice steady. "And?"

He sighed. "Do we have to play this game, Alex?"

"What did he tell you?" she asked seriously.

Maximilian's expression was grim. "He told me that you were spying on him and Darla Dearborn. You followed them into the basements, and he caught you trying to eavesdrop on them."

Alexandra's throat felt a little dry. "And what else did he tell you?"

Maximilian regarded her silently for several seconds.

"He said I should talk to you. It was actually more of a threat," he replied at last.

When Alexandra didn't say anything, he leaned forward, and spoke in a quiet voice. "I'm not going to threaten you, Alexandra. But I want to know what happened. I want to know why you did that. Are you trying to get yourself into trouble, just to prove you don't have to listen to me?"

"No!" she snapped. Then she looked around and lowered her voice. "I wanted to know why Darla was going down there with John. She's been acting really weird."

"You were worried about your friend?" Maximilian asked skeptically.

Alexandra looked away. "She's not my friend... anymore." When she looked back at Maximilian, he was just watching her silently.

"Okay, it was stupid," she admitted.

The corner of his mouth twitched, but there was no humor in his voice. "Is that all? Are you saying John caught you and told you to broom, and that was it?"

From his expression, Alexandra was pretty sure Maximilian knew that wasn't it.

"If I tell you what happened, you have to promise not to have a cow."

He scowled. "Have a...? Would you stop using Muggle slang?"

"See? You're already losing your temper."

Maximilian closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. He opened them again. "I will not... have a cow," he said slowly.

Hesitantly, Alexandra told her brother about following John and Darla down to the lowest basement level – and though she did not tell him that she herself possessed the 'obol' Darla had lost, she saw Maximilian's eyes go wide when she mentioned Darla's plea, and he got a very odd look when she mentioned the Lands Below.

"John doesn't know I heard all that," Alexandra concluded. "I lied to him."

"I see." Maximilian was still being very calm and attentive. "And he just took your word for it? When he caught you?"

She took a breath. "This is the part where you have to promise not to have a cow."

"I already promised!" he snapped.

She looked at him steadily, and his eyes dropped. "Sorry," he gritted. "Go ahead."

It was more difficult than she expected, to talk about being pinned to the floor by the Deadweight Spell, and then Crucioed by Darla. She kept her voice even, watching Maximilian warily. His eyes flashed and his expression darkened, and she saw him clenching his fists hard enough to turn his knuckles white, but he didn't move.

"It wasn't that bad," she mumbled. "Darla's weak. She's too incompetent to do a real Cruciatus Curse."

"Are you sure?" Maximilian murmured. He shook his head slowly, and stared at the table for a long time.

"Max?" Alexandra asked at last. He didn't respond immediately, and then he looked up at her.

"All right." He exhaled slowly.

"All right what?" she asked, confused.

"It's over." His voice was heavy. He looked utterly dejected. "I will go to Dean Grimm. I'll tell her everything I know. I won't let this go on."

Alexandra stared at him. "What will happen?"

"John, and Darla, and everyone else in the Mors Mortis Society, will be expelled, I assume. Hopefully I won't be expelled along with them, assuming someone in the Office of Special Inquisitions confirms that I wasn't just a Dark Arts student myself." He shrugged. "They won't be happy that I failed to accomplish what they wanted, so who knows?" At Alexandra's startled look, he added quickly, "Don't worry about that, Alexandra."

“So your mission, you're just going to give up on it?”

“I promised I would never let anything like this happen to you again.” Maximilian shook his head. “I can't do it. I thought I could, but all I've done is cob things up and let you get hurt, when I'm not hurting you myself.”

Alexandra stared at her brother, sitting there in his uniform looking as if all the pride and arrogance had been crushed out of him. There was only a look of failure in his eyes now. Suddenly he really was just a teenage boy, trying so very hard to be a man.

“Max,” she said softly. He blinked and didn't look at her. Slowly, she reached across the table and took his hand, and he finally glanced at her.

“You didn't let me get hurt. It was my own fault. I shouldn't have followed John and Darla.”

“It doesn't matter. I made you a promise. And with those two out of here, you won't be in danger any more. Protecting you is more important than my stupid mission, and don't roll your eyes at me!”

She stopped rolling her eyes, with an effort. But she felt a surge of warmth for her brother.

“What about you?” she asked quietly. “Aren't you the one in danger, if you stay? John thinks you're too soft, because of me.”

He shook his head. “It doesn't matter, I told you. I'm going to end this —”

“Don't.”

He stopped, and looked at her.

“If this is really, really important to you,” she said, “then don't quit because of me. I'll be all right, honest. I promise not to get in trouble with the Society any more.” And as Maximilian stared at her, she whispered, “You can tell John you threatened to Crucio me if I do

anything like that again. Heck, you can tell him you did Crucio me. That should convince him where your loyalties lie.”

“Where my loyalties lie?” he repeated, shaking his head. “Alexandra...”

“I don't want you to give up because of me. Not if it's really important to you.”

She squeezed his hand, and very slowly, he placed his other hand over hers.

“Are you sure?” he whispered, in a thick voice.

She nodded. Then added, in a very serious tone: “If you don't succeed, how am I ever going to get a decent marriage proposal?”

He blinked at her, squinted at her deadpan expression, and then made a choking noise, trying not to burst out laughing. He rose to his feet, looked around, and then leaned across the table, to give her a kiss on the forehead.

“Jerk,” he murmured.

She gave him a wry smile.

“Dueling practice this weekend?”

She grinned. “Yes!”

As he let go of her hand, she said, “Max?”

“Yes?”

“What's an obol? And what are the Lands Below?”

His smile faded. “Nothing you need to worry about, Alex.”

“Let me help you, Max,” she pleaded earnestly.

He sighed. "Didn't you just promise you'd stay out of trouble?"

She looked down. His expression softened, and he ran a hand over her hair. "It's all shadows and cobwebs, Alex. Fables that John probably used to con Darla out of her savings."

"Okay," she muttered.

He squeezed her shoulder. "Don't be late for your detention."

She nodded, and Maximilian gave her a warm smile, before he left the library.

Big, fat, jerk, she thought, but not without affection.

She hadn't really expected him to tell her anything. Well, she wouldn't get into trouble just researching stuff in the library. She was pretty sure if she showed Maximilian the obol, he'd take it away from her. So she'd keep it out of Darla's hands, and figure out what it was, and then turn it over to him when it could help him impress the stupid Wizard Justice Department. She was going to help him whether he wanted her to or not.

Although Alexandra quickly determined that an obol was an ancient Greek coin, the pictures she found in the encyclopedia were nothing more than photographs taken from a Muggle museum, and looked nothing like the coin Charlie had stolen. Over the next week, she searched volumes about ancient magical talismans and wizarding currency, and found only a few more references to ancient myths. Apparently, the Greeks had believed that obols were used to pay the ferryman who took dead souls across the River Styx to Hades. That made her think of the cave in the basement, where the Mors Mortis Society had summoned some kind of spirit.

Looking up 'Lands Below' was also frustrating. The two citations she found in the Charmbridge library's magical Card Catalog referred to books that were – to Alexandra's complete non-surprise – off-limits to students without a teacher's permission slip.

Why do they give us a library if everything interesting is kept in books we aren't allowed to check out? she thought irritably.

She knew what the next step was, but she put it off, feeling guilty about once more beseeching Bran and Poe to help her circumvent the rules.

In the meantime, if relations between Alexandra and Darla had been chilly before, they were now blisteringly cold. They did not speak to each other, they sat at opposite ends of the table in the cafeteria (when Darla wasn't sitting with John, or other older members of the Mors Mortis Society), and they avoided each other in class. But when they did pass each other in the hallways, or have to confront one another in their shared bathroom, Alexandra always made sure to look Darla directly in the eye. And though Darla maintained a haughty expression, she was always the one who looked away first.

Anna was concerned. Angelique was subdued. Alexandra occasionally asked Darla's roommate if everything was all right, and Angelique insisted that Darla had apologized for throwing a temper tantrum over her missing coin.

"Can't y'all just make peace?" she pleaded.

"No," Alexandra replied coldly, ignoring Angelique's dejected look.

She didn't ask Maximilian how things had gone with John. Since no one got expelled, and neither she nor any of her friends were cursed, she assumed that John was satisfied that she had been put in her place. The thought galled her, but for Maximilian's sake, she endured the occasional malicious leers that Mors Mortis Society members cast in her direction.

The following weekend, though, Maximilian made a point of teaching her the Deadweight Spell, and its counterspell.

Halfway through March, she gave in to curiosity and frustration, and sought out the library elves. Mrs. Minder was used to Alexandra visiting Bran and Poe, and showed her to the small room in the back where they were cataloging a pile of new books.

“Miss Quick!” Bran exclaimed.

“Miss Alex!” Poe cried, making a squeeing noise.

“Just Alex!” she protested, giving them both hugs. They beamed so to see her, Alexandra's mood instantly lightened. She sat down with them and asked what they were doing, and listened politely as they explained the proper procedures for cataloging, indexing, stamping, and covering new library books.

Then they paused, and looked at her expectantly. She shifted in her seat, and cleared her throat.

“We knows when Alex is wanting something,” said Bran.

“She sits very patient,” agreed Poe sagely.

Alexandra winced. “I do visit 'cause I like you guys, you know.”

“We knows,” said Poe. The elves actually looked amused.

“We likes Alex, too,” said Bran.

“Alex is very young,” added Poe, and Bran nodded.

Alexandra wasn't sure what that meant. She wondered how old the elves were. Then, she reached into her pocket and pulled out the obol. “I was hoping you could help me figure out what this is. I've been trying to find a book about the Lands Below –”

She was completely unprepared for the elves' reaction. They both stared at the coin with enormous, bulging eyes, and sucked in wheezing breaths as their wrinkled little faces went pale and ashen.

“Oh nooooooooo,” moaned Poe.

“Nononononono!” wailed Bran.

“What?” Alex asked.

"Don't do it, Alex! Please don't do it!" Bran begged.

Poe seemed to be gnashing his teeth. "Alex should not go there! We doesn't want to send her there!"

"Don't make us!" Bran quavered.

"Send me where? I don't want to go anywhere! Calm down!" She looked nervously at the door, afraid that Mrs. Minder might hear the elves' cries and enter. "Just tell me what this is."

The two elves looked at each other, and blinked together. They looked back at her, and then, fearfully, at the coin in her hand.

"It's a bad thing," said Poe.

"If Alex doesn't know what it is, she doesn't need it," insisted Bran.

"Let us fetch Mrs. Minder," Poe begged. "She will take it from you."

Alexandra closed her fingers over the obol. "No!" she said. "I want to know what it is!" She glared at them. "You wouldn't really tell on me, would you?"

They looked at each other uncertainly.

"Children should not have such things," said Poe.

"Is it Dark magic?" Alexandra asked.

The elves paused.

"Not... exactly," replied Bran.

She leaned forward. "If you tell anyone I have it, I'll just hide it," she threatened stubbornly. The two elves' ears drooped. A little guiltily, she opened her hand again, and watched as the two elves stared at it and shuddered. "What is it?" she demanded.

"It is an obol, Miss Alex," replied Bran.

"Yeah, I know that already. What's the big deal about it? It's an old coin. Does it really take you across the River Styx?"

The elves blinked again.

"The River Styx?" Bran repeated.

"That is just a myth," Poe informed her.

"So you don't put it under a corpse's tongue?"

Both elves' faces wrinkled up into expressions of disgust. "No, Miss Alex!"

"It is not for passage to the Lands Beyond," murmured Bran, shivering.

Alexandra tilted her head. "Okay... I've heard of the Lands Beyond, and the Lands Below. What's the difference?"

Bran and Poe looked at her unhappily. "These is not fit subjects for young students."

"Right, it's much better for everyone but me to know about this stuff!" Alexandra retorted. "You know that if you don't help me, I'll find out on my own eventually."

Bran's tiny shoulders slumped. Poe moaned, and clutched his head. For a moment, Alexandra feared the elf was about to "punish" himself, the way they did when they'd violated the librarian's orders, but he just shook his head side to side and then sat back down on his three-legged stool.

"Miss Alex is going to get herself into trouble, we knows it," he moaned miserably.

"I'm not!" she insisted. She shook her head. "You know, there are always things going on at Charmbridge, with students knowing things

they're not supposed to know, and doing things they're not supposed to do. And sometimes, we can't even trust the adults."

Bran and Poe frowned unhappily at that, but they knew what had happened to her last year, with Mr. Journey.

"It would be better if Alex trusts someone," Bran told her.

"I am," she replied earnestly. "I'm trusting you."

The elves could only stare at her, and then, with a sigh, Poe pleaded, "Please promise you will not give that coin to any elf, Alex."

"Why not? Does it free you?" She grimaced, as the two elves winced at the dreaded f-word, but they shook their heads.

"No," Poe replied. "It is very much the opposite. We must accept it as payment from any who gives it to us, because we is not free."

She looked down at the obol in her hand. "I don't understand."

"By ancient compact," Bran explained, "it is we elves who is appointed to stand between the world of wizards, and the Lands Below." His voice was deep and solemn, his words more formal than Alexandra was used to hearing from elves. "Elves is forbidden to take anyone between, and elves is forbidden to cross ourselves."

"It is said, long, long ago, we could go between freely," Poe murmured, and then Bran shushed him, and shook his head. "But the Lands Below is not a place anyone wants to go, Alex," he continued, in a hushed voice. "The Lands Below is dangerous and wild. It is not a place for humans, not wizards or Muggles."

Alexandra was listening breathlessly, and then she looked at the obol again, and said, "Someone must want to go."

Bran and Poe were silent at that. Finally, Poe spoke again. "Obols is the fare that elves must accept, and if you gives it to an elf..." Then Poe's voice cracked, and both elves' eyes filled with tears.

“Please don't, Alex!” Bran pleaded.

“I won't,” she assured him quickly. “I told you, I don't want to go anywhere. I just want to know what this is. And why someone else would want to go there. What's this ancient compact? And where do obols come from, and why are they used as fare? Obols are supposed to be Greek, but this doesn't look Greek to me. And...” Her voice trailed off, as Bran and Poe both looked terribly saddened and fearful.

“We knows legends,” said Bran. “And we knows the magic that binds us.”

“But we cannot answer all these questions,” Poe said mournfully. “Alex will have to look elsewhere for answers.”

“But we wish she wouldn't,” Bran added.

Alexandra stared at her two elf friends for several moments. She wondered if they did know more, but she couldn't bring herself to push them further. She sighed.

“Will Alex please give the obol to a grown-up?” Poe pleaded.

“I'll think about it,” she muttered guiltily. And, taking a deep breath, she pressed on. “One more question, and a request.”

The elves looked at each other, and back at her, and waited apprehensively.

“The Lands Below and the Lands Beyond... are they the same?” she asked.

Both elves looked startled. Bran shook his head. “No, Alex,” he replied slowly.

“The Lands Below is dangerous and wild,” Poe said, “but it is possible to return from there.”

“But from the Lands Beyond...” Bran's voice was almost a whisper.
“Never.”

Alexandra swallowed, and nodded. Then she told them, “There's a book called The Forbidden Book of Forbidden Places, but the Card Catalog won't tell me where it is.”

“That's because it is forbidden, Alex,” Bran replied.

“Right.” She nodded. “That brings me to my request.”

Thirteen

Alexandra had been hoping to find some loophole that would allow Bran and Poe to help her get her hands on *The Forbidden Book of Forbidden Places*. But they insisted that there was no way to do so that would not be a violation of their duties, and reinforced the point by beating themselves over the head with large, hardbound volumes, until Alexandra begged them to stop. Reluctantly, she agreed to abandon her quest for forbidden books.

For now, she added silently to herself.

The library elves did help her request a book from the New Amsterdam Public Wizards' Library: *The Lands Below, and Other Native Muggle Tales*. It was actually listed as 'children's fiction,' so Alexandra supposed it probably wouldn't be very enlightening, but it was the only book mentioning the Lands Below that wasn't on the restricted reading list. Bran and Poe told her it would probably arrive by owl in a week or two.

In the meantime, Alexandra delved into books about Numismancy, talismans, wizarding burial rituals, and Greek lore. She found a very old and complicated spell for transforming a coin into 'ghost currency' (though what use ghosts would have for currency, the book did not explain), and a reference to ancient Greek wizards being buried with 'oboluses' so they would not return as ghosts. Fascinating as this was, it didn't tell her what the connection might be to the Lands Below.

She wondered, also, why Darla had been so desperate to obtain an obol. Alexandra could think of no reason why Darla would want to go to the Lands Below, and was almost tempted to just confront the other girl directly and ask her. But that would necessarily lead to admitting that she had Darla's missing obol.

The weather was beginning to turn warmer. What little snow there had been was long gone, and Maximilian took her out for broom riding or dueling practice every weekend in March. She continued to thrill at their "wizard duels," though she was still frustrated by her inability to beat any of the Stormcrows one-on-one.

"You are improving," said Maximilian, as he and Beatrice helped her out of a tree one Saturday. It was the twenty-first of March. Martin was rolling over and over on his broom, laughing. He had knocked Alexandra clean off her broom, and only a gust of wind conjured by Maximilian had blown her into the treetops. She clung to a top branch that bent perilously towards the ground, too far below, until her brother retrieved her.

"Watch yourself, Martin," Beatrice cautioned the other boy. "She could really have been hurt if she'd fallen from that height."

Martin waved a hand dismissively, and did another acrobatic sideways roll. "Max saved her, didn't he?"

Alexandra climbed onto her brother's broom and held onto him. "He always gets me," she muttered.

"He has to work at it harder now, though," Maximilian observed.

Alexandra glared at Martin, still goofing off on his broom, and suddenly pointed her wand. "Accio broom!"

Martin's broom jerked and scooted out from beneath him as he was rolling. He yelped, and had to grab it with both hands. It didn't move any further, but for a moment, he was dangling below the suspended broom, with his legs kicking in the air, and Alexandra, still holding her wand extended, shouted, "Levicorpus!" Martin howled as his feet suddenly swung in an upwards arc, and then he was hanging upside down, grabbing the broom from above.

"You cursed me when we weren't dueling, you little sneak!" Martin yelled. "That was dirty!"

"No rules, no timeouts, remember?" Alexandra smirked, and then felt the tip of a wand pressed against her neck.

"Do you really want to play that way?" Beatrice asked sweetly, sitting on her broom next to her and Maximilian.

Alexandra gave Beatrice an innocent look, and said, "Liberacorpus!" Martin fell, once more jerking to a halt as he held onto his broom, and then pulled himself up onto it again.

"Pull that again, and I'll hang you upside down and pants you," he growled.

Alexandra just snickered, though she did flush a little. She wouldn't put it past Martin to carry out his threat.

"How did you do that?" Maximilian asked, as they returned to the academy. "We've only practiced Levicorpus a couple of times."

Alexandra shrugged. "I just did it like you showed me, and it worked."

Maximilian shook his head. "You're going to be a hell of a witch, Alex."

She tried to hide how pleased that made her feel, and replied, "I still can't do Summoning Charms very well, though."

"I told you, they're not as easy as they look. Most seventh graders would be hopeless at them. Like Darla."

Alexandra stiffened slightly. "What do you mean?"

Maximilian cleared his throat. "Never mind."

Alexandra wanted very much to ask more questions, but she thought she knew where Darla might have been trying to learn Summoning Charms – and why.

I need to find a safer place to keep the obol, she thought. Maybe Darla couldn't Summon it out of her pocket, but what if she talked John or Maximilian into trying?

Back inside, she looked at her brother, and asked, casually, "So, doing anything tomorrow?"

“Studying,” he answered. “And then me and the other senior JROC officers have a meeting to plan training and surprise inspections for you lazy new wands.”

“Oh,” she replied, not responding to his teasing. She was disappointed, but tried to hide it. “Okay. See you in the cafeteria, then, maybe.”

He nodded, and clapped her on the shoulder. “Enjoy the rest of your weekend, Alex.”

Feeling a bit let down, she returned to her room, where Anna asked her, “Finished letting Max and his friends beat you up?”

“Yeah.” Alexandra rolled her eyes at her roommate. “I guess I should probably do my homework now.”

“You probably should. But David and Constance and Forbearance and I are all going to play Heart of Three Kingdoms in the rec room tomorrow, if you’re not going to be doing anything with your brother.”

“Okay.” Alexandra nodded. “No, nothing special tomorrow. Max is busy.” She shrugged, and didn’t notice Anna’s eyes twinkling as she opened her Transfiguration textbook.

Early the next morning, while Anna was in the shower, Alexandra squatted and lifted the dresser next to her desk, moving it over a few inches. She laid the obol down and cast a Sticking Charm and then a Deadweight Spell on it, and then, for good measure, held her wand over the coin.

She knew from her Basic Magical Theory class that the ‘doggerel verse’ she’d used when she was younger was a crude and haphazard substitute for properly-tested spells – but it had worked. Sometimes. And she wasn’t sure how long the Deadweight Spell would last.

“Obol, stay glued to the floor;
I command you to ignore
any Summons, or attempt to lift you,
until I pick you up, or gift you.”

She didn't know if one of her rhymes would really work against a Summoning Charm. But she couldn't think of any more effective precautions. She pushed the dresser back over the coin, and went over to the window, to let Charlie out.

Charlie had begun fussing when she had taken the coin out of her pocket, so she had hung her father's locket in front of the birdcage to distract the raven. As she opened her bedroom window, however, she noticed that the locket was glowing. Just a little, in the morning light, but the unnatural shimmer was noticeable. Charlie cawed and pecked at it, trying to snatch it from her hand, and Alexandra shooed her familiar away with an annoyed grimace. "Go on, Charlie, go find some worms or something!" Then added, "But not any more coins or other shiny things!"

With a harsh caw, Charlie took off through the open window, and Alexandra glanced at the bathroom door. Anna was still in the shower, so Alexandra opened the locket, and saw her father smiling at her.

Alexandra.

She gasped, and stared at Abraham Thorn's bearded face, turned towards her in a three-quarters profile. She hadn't heard her father say her name, but nonetheless, she was sure he had called to her.

"Can you see me?" she whispered to the cameo, with another glance at the bathroom door.

Her father smiled a little more broadly.

I can now.

She closed her eyes, concentrating.

Are you reading my mind? she thought.

There was a pause, and then she felt, more than heard, her father's words again.

Speak out loud.

She opened her eyes, and gave her father an annoyed look. "Are you reading my mind?" she repeated.

I can only hear the thoughts you share with me, and you don't know how.

That was good, she thought. She didn't like the idea of anyone being able to read her mind.

Why have you not been wearing the locket?

She frowned at his picture. "I don't know. I didn't know you could talk to me through it."

I cannot, usually. This is not a simple spell, and it requires concentration from both of us.

She considered that. "I guess it would be bad if Diana Grimm knew about this, then."

I would rather she did not.

She nodded. She had no intention of telling Diana Grimm about her locket. "So why now?"

You know why, Alexandra. Today is a special day.

"Is it?" she muttered.

Of course it is, darling child. My daughter's thirteenth birthday is very important. Did you really think I would forget about it?

She blinked, and regarded her father's face coolly.

"Why not? You forgot all my other birthdays."

I never forgot, my dear. Please, let us not argue. We cannot speak long.

"Fine. Thanks for the 'happy birthday.' If you can't come in person, a voice in my head is just as good, right?"

Alexandra, the Inquisitors would expect me to try to visit you on your birthday. I dare not even send Hagar today.

"That's all right," she muttered. "It's not like I was expecting a present."

Ah, but you shall have one. What would you like?

She was tempted to point out that asking her on her birthday what she wanted was hardly showing interest in her life, but instead, she said, "I've got more questions. I talked to Mom."

There was a pause, before his next reply.

I think this is a conversation we should have when we can speak more easily.

"When will that be?"

Soon, Alexandra.

"You make lots of promises."

She heard Anna opening the bathroom door, and whispered, "I've got to go; my roommate is coming."

Alexandra, please wear the lock—

His words faded as she snapped the locket closed and dropped it into her pocket. Anna emerged, in a bathrobe, running her wand over her hair. "Ready to go to breakfast?" she asked.

"Yeah, sure," Alexandra replied. As Anna got dressed, something flapped through the window. Both girls turned, and Alexandra was disappointed, for a second, to see that it was an owl, not a raven. She

took the envelope the bird was carrying, and thanked it. It hooted before flying away.

“Money from your parents, again?” Anna asked.

Alexandra looked up from the envelope, which she had just opened to find a card and some green Muggle bills inside.

Anna grinned at her. “You thought I forgot about your birthday, didn't you?” She walked over and gave her roommate a hug. “Happy birthday, Alex!”

“Thanks, Anna.” Alexandra smiled, hugging her back. She had never had a big deal made over her birthdays. At home, “parties” had usually consisted of Brian and Bonnie coming over to share a birthday cake her mother would buy on the way home from work. But it was nice to know that other people had remembered.

She was surprised, however, that Lilith Grimm was one of those people.

They didn't usually see the Dean except during the week, and rarely then. In fact, like most students, Alexandra imagined that the faculty simply disappeared after class, and rematerialized when school hours resumed. She knew that wasn't true, of course, but the only teachers or deans they usually saw on weekends were those assigned as chaperones. The unfortunate faculty members stuck with weekend duty would stay in their offices or the teachers' lounge most of the time, and students enjoyed the illusion that they had the school to themselves.

Sunday morning, however, Dean Grimm was at the entrance to the cafeteria, nodding to students as they went in and out. She did this sometimes, appearing suddenly to maintain a watchful presence in the hallways or near the library, or anywhere else students congregated. Today, she actually had Galen in her arms. Holding her cat didn't make her any less intimidating; as usual when the Dean was around, conversation was muted, and no one was throwing jinxes, trying to sabotage the Clockworks, or threatening to levitate food around the cafeteria.

“Good morning, Miss Quick,” said the Dean, as she and Anna passed by.

“Good morning, Ms. Grimm,” Alexandra replied, echoed by Anna. She expected to keep walking – after all, she'd mostly stayed out of trouble, ever since the episode with Darla, and she hadn't been called to the Dean's Office in months. But Ms. Grimm spoke again, before the girls continued on.

“This is a special day, isn't it, Miss Quick?”

Alexandra paused and looked at her, nonplussed.

“Your thirteenth birthday, yes?” asked the Dean, arching an eyebrow.

“Yes, ma'am,” Alexandra replied.

“Thirteen is a number of great significance, as you know from basic Arithmancy. Those who believe in the arts of Divination often wait until a child's thirteenth year to have her future read. There are a number of coming-of-age rituals that used to be common on a witch's thirteenth birthday.” The Dean smiled wryly. “My staff considers thirteen a very unlucky number to be in charge of. It's quite a difficult age, when children increasingly yearn to be adults. Dean Black has his hands full.”

Alexandra shuffled, not sure what to say. It confused her when Ms. Grimm suddenly took notice of her, and she wasn't always sure what point the woman was trying to make. Next to her, Anna was standing still, and completely silent. Dean Grimm terrified her.

“I haven't been in trouble lately,” Alexandra muttered.

“Yes, it's been a whole month since your last detention, and you haven't been in my office all semester. I believe that's a new record.” Grimm looked amused. Alexandra wasn't, but she held her tongue.

“Enjoy your birthday, Miss Quick,” the Dean told her. Galen, who appeared to be dozing, opened one sleepy eye, regarded Alexandra for a moment, and then closed it again.

Alexandra nodded. “Thank you, ma'am.” She and Anna looked at each other as they walked away.

David joined them in the cafeteria. Alexandra didn't know exactly what the Pritchards did on Sunday mornings, but she knew they always ate early, so she and Anna and David ate breakfast together, and then made their way up to the seventh graders' rec room.

Constance and Forbearance were waiting already, and as Alexandra entered the room, there was a shower of sparks. A multitude of birds materialized out of the air and began flapping around her, and then ribbons and streamers rained down from the ceiling. She was surprised to see Torvald and Stuart, just before the two eighth grade boys grinned and began wrapping her in sticky web-like streamers shooting from their wands. Maximilian and Beatrice and Martin were there. So was David's roommate Dylan Weitzner, and Carol Queen and Sonja Rackham as well, though the latter two looked as if they'd only wandered by and had stepped in to see what was going on. Charlotte Barker and her boyfriend, whose name Alexandra didn't know because he wasn't in JROC, were standing next to Maximilian and the other two Blacksburg students. Everyone cheered and clapped, and then, to Alexandra's embarrassment, they began singing “Happy Birthday.”

At the conclusion of the song, there was a loud pop, and a large, multilayered cake with thirteen candles appeared on a table already laden with candied witch-apples and cookies, Fizzy-Pop, and Butterbeer.

Maximilian winked at her. “You thought I forgot it was your birthday, didn't you?”

“I didn't think you knew it was my birthday,” she replied, and he laughed.

“The kitchen elves made the cake,” Constance informed her.

Alexandra was still trying to free herself from the sticky webbing. "Do the elves make birthday cakes for everyone's thirteenth birthday?"

"We had to ask special," said Constance.

"They usually will do it for anyone, if you ask," Charlotte told them.

Anna and David began helping to cut the sticky strands binding her arms and tangling her hair. Stuart and Torvald were giggling, until Maximilian used a spell to yank their wands out of their hands. Then he waved his wand again, and the thirteen candles on the cake suddenly blazed alight.

"Wish something, Alexandra," urged Forbearance.

"And then make sure you don't wish nothing else, or use your wand, for the rest of the day," warned Constance.

Alexandra looked confused, and Beatrice explained: "It's an old superstition. If you make a wish on your thirteenth birthday, and don't use any magic the whole day, your wish will come true. Don't take it seriously; there's no spell to work that. It's just superstition."

Constance and Forbearance both looked as if they didn't agree, but they didn't argue with the older girl. Alexandra shrugged. Can't hurt, she thought, as she made a wish, and then bent over to blow out the candles. The flames didn't even flicker as she blew on them.

"What are you doin'?" asked Constance.

"You can't blow out the candles on a Jubilation Cake!" laughed Forbearance.

Alexandra shook her head. There were times when she almost felt at home in the wizarding world, now, and times when the smallest things would still remind her how much she didn't know that wizarding children took for granted.

The cake popped and crackled, and the candles sent up showers of sparks, as the Pritchards cut it and began distributing pieces. It didn't seem to get any smaller even as everyone in the room helped themselves to the sweet, multicolored layers of frosting and cake.

"Now you're officially a teenager," David declared, relishing his fat slice of cake.

"Merlin help us all," Martin drawled.

Alexandra rolled her eyes at him, but she was happy, and touched. As she opened the presents her friends had given her, Forbearance said quietly, "We invited Darla and Angelique."

"I think Angelique would have come," Anna mumbled.

Alexandra nodded. "But Darla would have flipped out, and Angelique is more scared of Darla than she is of me."

"Alexandra, can't you bury the hatchet with Darla?" Constance asked.

"Y'all are worse than you was last year with Larry Albo." Forbearance frowned at her.

"Feuds are awful things," Constance admonished.

Alexandra shook her head. She knew the Pritchards meant well, but they didn't know the whole story. Even Anna didn't know the whole story.

"Maybe when she admits she cursed David, and apologizes for it," Alexandra replied. "That would be a start." But not nearly enough.

"That ain't gonna happen," David snorted. "She'd be expelled, for one thing."

Alexandra exchanged a look with Maximilian, and shrugged. She was enjoying her birthday party; she didn't want to talk about Darla.

The Pritchards gave her a beautiful new cape for her dress uniform. Alexandra held it out and admired it, while Constance assured her, "We made sure it was proper."

"Maximilian gave us the regulations, and Beatrice gave us your measurements," explained Forbearance.

Alexandra raised an eyebrow at Anna's gift: a book called Beginning Chinese Charms for Foreign Devils.

"It's an old book." Anna was blushing a little. "The title isn't the best translation, but it's a classic, and really useful."

"Alexandra, the Foreign Devil," snickered David, and Anna blushed some more.

David gave her a Wizard Wireless set, which he'd ordered from the Grundy's owl-order catalog.

"Kind of an expensive present," Maximilian commented. Alexandra and David both opened their mouths to protest, and then Alexandra saw Maximilian winking at Beatrice and Martin.

"Shut up!" She gave her brother a push.

Beatrice and Martin had chipped in to give her a pair of self-polishing dress shoes. "Since you need the help," Martin cracked.

Alexandra breathed in with excitement as she picked up the largest of her presents: a very long, somewhat haphazardly-wrapped package whose shape left little doubt as to what it was even before she unwrapped it, pausing only long enough to read the tag from Maximilian.

"No way!" she exclaimed, and tore the paper away. It was a new broom, with a thicker shaft than racing models, black at the base and shading into blue towards the front. The stiff wire-like bristles were too short to do any real sweeping.

"A 2009 Valkyrie," said Beatrice, impressed. "Might be too much broom for a new wand like you, Quick."

"Just wait and see!" Alexandra grinned, and then looked at her brother, wondering where he'd gotten the money to buy a brand new, top of the line broom. This was an expensive present!

"My first broom was a Valkyrie," he told her, as if his gift were nothing remarkable. "I like the Twister, now – less stable, but more nimble. But a Valkyrie will outfly any of those piece-of-kindling school brooms."

Alexandra showed it off to her friends, then let them pass it back and forth to admire it, while she walked over to her brother, hesitated, and then gave him a hug.

"Thanks, Max," she murmured.

"You do know you can't fly it at home," he warned, returning her hug with a pat on the shoulder.

"I know." She looked up at him, and whispered, "I want to talk to you about something."

He nodded. "So do I," he whispered back.

But their friends were still there, and she could hardly turn her back on them at her own birthday party, so it wasn't until later that afternoon that she and Maximilian had a chance to go outside together, and try out her new broom.

"I've never had such a big deal made out of my birthday before," she said, as they stepped onto the grass past the paved exercise yards and walkways. It was a bit chilly today, though the afternoon sun was still shining brightly across the woods and Charmbridge's lawns.

"It is an important day." Maximilian nodded. "You don't see the old ceremonies practiced much anymore, but some very traditional Old Colonial families still don't give their children wands until their thirteenth birthday."

“That sucks for them,” Alexandra replied scornfully.

Maximilian shrugged. “It used to be, boys weren't wizards and girls weren't witches until they turned thirteen. You weren't considered ready for the wizarding world until then.”

She gave him a half-smile. “So I'm ready for the wizarding world now?”

He snorted. “Not even close. You don't have another 'boyfriend,' do you?”

She wrinkled her nose and shook her head. Then she held her new Valkyrie out at arm's length, letting it float off the ground, tethered only by the loose grip of her fingers, admiring its dark, glossy shaft and blunt, powerful profile, and the way it hovered there without even the tiniest wobble. It felt like it was anxious to take off, though – or maybe that was her. So she swung her legs over the handle, settled back into a hunched ready position, and pulled up hard.

“Wow!” she exclaimed, as the broom launched into the air, with several times the acceleration she was used to. Her hair whipped behind her and she had to squint as the wind roared around her face.

“Slow down!” Maximilian yelled, as he came zooming after her, while she leaned forward and rocketed into the sky. “If Colonel Shirliffe sees you ignoring flying rules in sight of the school, you'll have your new broom confiscated! And I'll lose another stripe for letting you!”

Reluctantly, she leveled off and slowed down. She couldn't wait to test the limits of the Valkyrie, and she knew that when she went home to Larkin Mills, leaving it sitting in her closet all summer would be torture.

Maximilian, astride his narrow, more responsive Twister, pulled even with her, and smiled. “You like it?”

She grinned at him. "You know I do!" She was sure it had to have been awfully expensive, too. She wondered what she would ever get him for his birthday. Then her grin faded, as she looked around.

"The Office of Special Inquisitions couldn't be watching us right now, could they?"

"They could," he replied, very seriously. He drew his wand, and said, "Muffliato," then put his wand back in its sheath. "That will stop most eavesdropping attempts, though we could still be watched by scrying spells."

"I won't show you the locket, then." When Maximilian raised an eyebrow, she told him about the locket their father had given her for Christmas, and her 'conversation' with him that morning.

"Do you or Julia have a locket like that?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No, though he has contacted us through pictures and mirrors before. He has lots of ways to communicate when he really wants to."

When he really wants to, she thought, but didn't say anything.

"He does have to be careful about sending presents. The Inquisitors can intercept them, and they'll examine anything he sends us," Maximilian said. "Usually Julia and I receive a purse full of Eagles."

"Oh. Money. How nice." She pursed her lips together, and stared off across the tops of the trees.

"He is trying, Alex."

She glanced back at her brother. "And you're defending him an awful lot."

He looked at her steadily for a moment, then shrugged. "Anyway... I have another present for you, of sorts."

“Another present?” She raised her eyebrows, and leaned forward, gripping the handle of her broom with both hands. “This one was pretty awesome!”

He smiled. “I’m glad you like it. But Easter vacation is coming in two weeks.”

She was a bit thrown off by the change of subject. “Yeah. I’ll be staying here.” Some students went home for the week-long spring break, but quite a few did not, and Alexandra didn’t want to admit that part of her wanted to go back to Larkin Mills for a week, and part of her was afraid to find out that her mother might not want her to.

He nodded. “I thought so. I’ll be taking the Wizardrail home for the week.”

“Oh.” Alexandra tried to hide her disappointment.

His dark eyes twinkled. “How would you like to come with me?”

She stared at him, not sure if she’d heard him correctly. “Go... to Roanoke, with you?”

“You said you wanted to meet Julia.”

Her eyes were wide. “Really? You’d really like me to come home with you?”

“No, I was just joking.” Alexandra’s face rippled with disappointment, and he snorted with exasperation. “Of course ‘really’! I already asked my mother, and she’d love to have you visit. Julia is very excited to meet another sister who’s younger than her.”

Alexandra felt her heart skip with excitement, but something nagged at her. “Your mother,” she asked slowly. “Does she really want me in her home? I mean, our father left her, and then some other woman had his baby...”

Maximilian smiled thinly, and shook his head. “Mother knew she wasn’t the first woman in Father’s life, and I think she realized she

wouldn't be the last long before you were born. She doesn't bear any ill will towards any of his other children, or their mothers. She said you're welcome at Croatoa. That's our ranch," he added, at her puzzled expression. "We raise horses."

"Horses?" Alexandra's eyes lit up.

"Winged horses." He grinned as her eyes lit up even more.

"Winged horses?" This was like Christmas and Disneyland and hexing Larry Albo, all at once!

Alexandra had never been outside the hundred mile radius prescribed by Chicago and Larkin Mills. Charmbridge Academy was as far from home as she'd ever gone. She couldn't begin to describe how excited she felt at the thought of such a trip. Ride the Wizardrail, see a real wizarding community, meet her half-sister... and winged horses!

Then her face fell.

"I'll need my mother's permission, won't I?"

"I suppose so," Maximilian replied. "Don't you think she'll let you go?"

Alexandra's shoulders slumped. "So, do I tell her I'm going to visit the other children of my father, who she never wanted to hear about again, or do I just tell her that I made friends with a sixteen-year-old boy at school and I want to go spend a week at his house over vacation?"

Maximilian blinked, and then his mouth quirked sideways, half bemused, half dismayed. "I see your point."

Alexandra's eyes lit up again. "We could just lie to her."

His expression didn't change, but she could hear the disapproval in his tone. "Lie to your mother?"

“Tell her I'm visiting my friend Julia. She won't know the difference. And that's not really a lie, exactly.” Then Alexandra's shoulders slumped again. “Except she'll want an address and a phone number, and she'll probably want to talk to your mother.”

“What's a phone number?”

“Yeah, that's what I figured.” Alexandra sighed. She'd gone from elated to crushed in the space of a few moments.

“I'm sure there's a way to work this out, Alex.”

She chewed her lip, and nodded. “There has to be!” she said fervently. Right now, she wanted this more than anything else in the world.

The Roanoke Underhill

Two things arrived the following week: *The Lands Below, and Other Native Muggle Tales*, and a letter from her mother.

Alexandra received the first while she was at the library, studying for the tests teachers always scheduled the week before vacation. She didn't get to see Bran and Poe, but Mrs. Minder told her that her Inter-Library Owl had arrived, and handed her an old children's book with hand-drawn illustrations that moved like wizarding photographs. Anna arrived at the library to study with her soon after that, so Alexandra wasn't able to look at the book again until later that night.

The Lands Below, and Other Native Muggle Tales appeared to be a collection of Native American legends – originally told by Native Americans, repeated by Muggles of European descent, and overheard by Colonial wizards, who then wrote them down to tell wizarding children. The result was an incoherent but imaginative series of stories about talking corn, beautiful women disguised as trees, shapeshifting rabbits who hunted foxes with bows, and caves in the clouds.

Unfortunately, the first story in the book, about the Lands Below, told her almost nothing. It was about a tribe of monsters who were banished to some sort of underworld by Indian wizards, where they were trapped for all time. There was no mention of anyone else getting in or out, or of elves, or obols.

Alexandra didn't know if there was any truth to any of the tales. Once she'd entered the wizarding world, it became hard to dismiss anything as impossible, even talking corn and shapeshifting rabbits. But the book had been written over a hundred years ago, it referred to Indians as “savage Red Muggles,” and the Indian wizards in the stories used wands and cast spells using Latin, so Alexandra was a little skeptical about its accuracy. She also noticed that wizards, even “savage Red” wizards, were always very wise and heroic (except for the Dark ones), while Muggles were usually rather stupid and cowardly. She'd noticed that in other old wizarding books as well.

Alexandra had written home, telling her mother that she had been invited to spend spring break with a classmate and her brother whose family didn't have telephones in their home. She begged for permission, promising to be on her very best behavior, but anticipated needing to find some way for her mother to communicate with her in Roanoke.

"Why don't you just tell her who I am?" Maximilian grumbled, when she explained how she'd bent the truth. "I doubt she'd be shocked to learn that your father has other children."

"She doesn't want to know," Alexandra told him. "And the less I tell her, the less likely that an Obfuscation Officer will visit her again."

He shook his head, exasperated, but recognized her stubbornness, and dropped it.

The letter Alexandra received back from her mother was brief:

"Dear Alex,

I hope you enjoy your time with your friend Julia. Do behave yourself. I don't want Ms. King to think you weren't raised properly. Please write when you get there. I am happy you're making such good friends at school. Keep up your grades. Archie and I look forward to seeing you in June.

Love,
Mom"

Accompanying this single paragraph letter was a permission slip, allowing her to leave the Charmbridge campus over spring break.

She was brooding a little when she found Maximilian that afternoon, and showed him the letter. His face broke into a smile, and he clapped her on the shoulder. "Everything's set, then! The bus will take us to the Wizardrail station in Chicago, and we'll ride the train to Roanoke. Mother and Julia will pick us up at Blacksburg."

"Great," Alexandra muttered.

He studied her face. "What's wrong, Alex? Don't you still want to go?"

She jerked her head up to look at him. "Of course I do! It's just..." She frowned, and looked down again.

Puzzled, he reread the letter, and then tilted his head and regarded her quizzically.

"She doesn't ask questions," Alexandra complained. "She just believed everything I told her, and said, 'Sure, no problem, go across the country with someone I've never heard of. See you in June.'"

Maximilian frowned. "Isn't that a good thing? Julia would love it if our mother let her get away with that."

Alexandra shrugged. "She'd probably be just as happy if I wrote and said I wanted to spend all summer with you, so she wouldn't have to see me at all this year —"

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, Alexandra! You hate it whenever you can't do whatever you please, and now you're sulking because your mother isn't controlling you or checking up on you. Would you be happier if she'd said no?"

"No," Alexandra replied. "But —"

"But you've been brooding about your mother ever since Christmas. Look, I admit she's more trusting than I'd be, knowing you." He grinned at the sour look she gave him, then squeezed her shoulder. "I am sorry your mother has been so hexed about you being a witch. But stop acting like such a thirteen-year-old girl."

"Excuse me?" Her eyes narrowed.

"Moody, sulky, feeling sorry for yourself —"

"I am not feeling sorry for myself!" she declared angrily. "And I'm not moody and sulky!"

He folded his arms and gave her a bemused look, which infuriated her more.

“You're a...a chauvinist pig! How does Julia put up with you?” she demanded.

“Ask her. So how about looking forward to the trip?” And in a gentler tone, he added, “Your mother has not abandoned you, Alex. Stop acting like she has.”

Alexandra did not like being lectured by her brother. Especially when he had a point.

“Fine,” she muttered. “I've got to go study.”

He sighed, and shook his head as she stalked off.

She was in a better mood by the following weekend. She couldn't help it, as the upcoming trip began filling her with excitement. Anna had helped, a bit; she wasn't as harsh as Maximilian, but she also commented that normally, Alexandra wouldn't think twice about getting what she wanted so easily.

“Your mother must know that your friends are witches and wizards,” she pointed out. “She's not dumb, is she?”

“No,” Alexandra admitted reluctantly.

“So, if she doesn't want to deal with the wizarding world, what choices does she have? Ask a lot of questions, just tell you no, or else give permission and hope everything is okay.”

Alexandra frowned.

“Do you really think your mother doesn't care about you?” Anna asked softly.

Alexandra looked at her roommate, and shook her head. “Do you really think I'm feeling sorry for myself?”

"A little." Anna gave her a small smile. "I think sometimes you're entitled to... a little. Now stop it."

Alexandra nodded, and tried to put her mother out of her mind, as she began preparing for her trip. When Anna was out of the room, she doubled-checked the obol beneath her dresser. The Deadweight Spell had not worn off. She knew Darla was also leaving over the spring break, so keeping the obol where it was seemed safe.

She considered her father's locket, and put it in her pocket.

Anna and David were also going home for spring break. They all felt a little sorry for the Pritchards, who were staying at Charmbridge, and were feeling homesick by now. Alexandra was surprised and grateful when Constance volunteered to take care of Nigel for her while she was gone. Forbearance didn't look thrilled at this arrangement, but held her tongue.

"Just keep your owls away from him, all right?" Alexandra said, as she handed Nigel's cage to Constance, Saturday morning.

"Course we will!" Constance huffed. "We ain't gonna feed your snake to our owls, Alexandra Quick!" She looked into the cage at Nigel, while Forbearance seemed to be avoiding eye contact with the reptile, and then both Ozarker girls looked up, and said in perfect unison: "Hi, Max!" Their voices came out like synchronized sighs, and they both tilted their heads slightly, in an unconscious perfect mirror reflection of one another.

Alexandra stared at them, and then at Maximilian, who was dressed for travel in his BMI uniform, as usual.

"Ladies." Maximilian nodded, very seriously, and Constance and Forbearance smiled at him and sighed in unison again. He looked at Alexandra. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah." She had only one bag to take with her, besides Charlie's cage and her broom. She noticed Darla and Angelique both waiting as Clockworks loaded their luggage onto flying carpets – four overstuffed bags each. Neither girl looked in Alexandra's direction.

"Your boyfriend isn't here to give you a kiss good-bye?" Martin smirked, as he joined Maximilian.

Alexandra rolled her eyes at him, while Maximilian shook his head and jabbed his friend in the ribs with his knuckles, warning, "Knock it off, Martin."

"He's coming with us?" Alexandra didn't bother trying to hide her displeasure.

"Only as far as Chicago," Martin told her. "Then I take the train to New Orleans, and from there, the Swamplicht Express to Florida." Over his shoulder, Alexandra saw Angelique look up at that, and the girl from New Orleans exchanged glances with Darla.

"Great," Alexandra muttered sarcastically. "Maybe you can flirt with Angelique this time."

"And here comes Chu. This will be a fun ride," Maximilian commented dryly, as Anna joined them outside, dragging a suitcase behind her with one hand, and trying to hold Jingwei's cage in the other. David, who was going home to Detroit, accompanied her, with his own familiar hooded and caged as well.

Alexandra sighed. Anna still didn't like Maximilian much more than when she'd been in JROC, even though he had stopped tormenting the younger girl. Fortunately, they didn't have to sit together on the bus.

"See you in a week," Alexandra said to the Pritchards, and they nodded and exchanged hugs with her and Anna. David stood back, watching the girls with a bemused smirk, and his arms folded tightly.

"You best stop rollin' your eyes, David Washington!" Constance scolded.

"Yeah, or they might hug you," Alexandra teased.

"Yeah, right," he scoffed, but he blushed and picked up Malcolm's cage, and hurried on ahead.

Mrs. Speaks and Ms. Gale took off on the flying carpets, taking everyone's baggage to the Charmbridge Bus, across the valley. But the students had to walk there, and so Alexandra and Anna fell behind as Maximilian and the other Stormcrows walked ahead, with David a little ways behind the older students. The woods were green and lush again, and the ground was damp underfoot. It wasn't raining at the moment, but it had been off and on for several days. Anna and Alexandra speculated about what it would be like to cross the Invisible Bridge in the rain, which they had never done before.

Angelique and Darla were trailing behind them, some distance further back.

"Do you think you and Darla will ever make up?" Anna asked quietly.

"No," Alexandra grated, and her expression became stony and she looked straight ahead.

Anna sighed. "She's not evil, Alex."

"I'll make you a deal." Alexandra jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "You make friends with Tomo, and I'll think about being nice to Darla again."

Anna frowned. The Japanese girl was even further behind them, at the end of the column of students walking through the woods towards the Invisible Bridge, keeping her head down and seemingly trying not to be noticed.

"That's different," Anna muttered.

"You're right. I've got a good reason to dislike Darla."

Anna gave her something close to a glare.

"Let's not fight," Alexandra pleaded, in a more placating tone. "Just forget about both of them, okay?"

The other girl nodded, and Alexandra was relieved. She didn't want to be nice to Darla, talk to her, or sit with her. And on the bus ride to Chicago, she didn't. She and Anna and David took a table for themselves, since the bus was less crowded than on the trips to the Goblin Market, and Angelique and Darla sat several booths away. Maximilian and the other Stormcrows sat in the front of the bus as usual. Alexandra didn't mind, since she'd be sitting with her brother on the train, all the way to Roanoke. Once they arrived in Chicago, David said good-bye to the two of them, and remained on the bus as Alexandra and Anna disembarked.

Alexandra had never actually seen the Chicago Wizardrail station, except from the outside. The wooden platform looked like something from an old movie, and she was expecting to see black locomotives belching smoke sitting on the tracks. Instead, once she'd stepped past the exterior and into the open waiting area, the first thing she noticed was a big blue engine sitting across the platform on the other side of the ticket booths. It looked sleek and shiny, though not really like a regular train engine. Its sweeping lines, flared vanes along its rear section, and sharp silver grill were all quite impressive, but it looked more like a cartoon or an illustration from an old science fiction magazine than a real train.

A tall wizard in a black uniform with a rounded, billed cap and long white goatee was bellowing, "All aboard! Last call for New Amsterdam!"

Wizards and witches in robes, tunics, dresses, and cloaks, and a few in Mugglewear, hurried to and fro, some of them to catch the departing train, some to buy tickets, some to greet new arrivals from the Star of Acadia line. The Wizardrail station was on the edge of the Goblin Market, and drew an equally fascinating crowd. Alexandra saw a flying carpet being steered by an elf porter, laden with such a large pile of packages and suitcases, only magic could have kept them from tumbling off in all directions. Several grim-looking warlocks in matching black and green robes, with cowls pulled over their faces and their hands lost in their voluminous sleeves, walked together in lockstep to another gate with a hand-painted sign that said, 'New Orleans.' An exceedingly ugly old woman wrapped in tattered black

robes suddenly paused to look at all the Charmbridge students now filing into the station.

Alexandra recognized that look – she'd met a vampire who'd looked at her the same way. She had to suppress a grimace; the crone's eyes had a red tint, and her wart-covered nose was the approximate size and shape of a potato.

“Move along, Hilda,” barked a wizard in a red uniform, with a badge on his chest that said 'Wizardrail Auror Authority.' He jabbed her with a wand, and the hideous-looking woman glared at him, eyes flashing even redder.

“I'm just checking train schedules!” she croaked.

“You never go anywhere, Hilda. Now skedaddle! Before I run you in for loitering.”

“Loitering!” she spat. “I have rights!” But as the wizard brandished his thick black wand, she pulled her moth-eaten shawl over her shoulders and scurried off with surprising speed, despite her hunched posture. Alexandra watched her go, curious and disgusted at the same time, and then Maximilian pulled her towards the ticket booths.

He pushed a stack of Eagles under the metal bars at the ticket agent's booth, and received two bright, gold-foiled tickets in return. He thanked the elderly wizard behind the bars, and handed a ticket to Alexandra. It read: 'Roanoke Underhill: First Class (Child).'

“The sign says 'Children's fare 12 and under'!” she protested, as they walked away. “I'm thirteen!”

“The ticket agent assumed you were twelve,” Maximilian replied, with a shrug. “I didn't correct him.” He grinned at Alexandra's indignant expression. “You can go back and pay the difference, if you like.”

“You just do things like that to annoy me!” she muttered, as she and Maximilian joined Martin and Anna, who was deliberately standing a few paces away from the older boy. They had both bought their own tickets already.

"The Delta Blue Blazer is boarding now," said Martin.

"Our train will be coming into the station in a few minutes." Maximilian shook hands with Martin. "See you in a week."

"Stay away from Angelique," Alexandra said to Martin.

Maximilian rolled his eyes at her. Martin just smirked. "Still trying to fix her up with your friend?" he asked, giving her a poke in the shoulder. "You mind your brother, wand!" He winked at her and ignored her glare, as he strode off through the gates.

"The train to California doesn't leave for a couple of hours yet," Anna sighed.

"Sorry," Alexandra replied. She and Anna hugged each other. Alexandra noticed Tomo dragging her own luggage onto a bench and sitting down, looking quite small and alone, but did not suggest that Anna pass the time chatting with the sixth grader.

"Take care of yourself," Anna whispered, "and be careful."

"Be careful?" Alexandra laughed. "I'll be with my brother. What's to worry about?"

Anna shook her head. Maximilian put a hand on Alexandra's shoulder and guided her towards the gate. She shrugged his hand off, as he called, "Don't get eaten by a hag, Chu!" with a flippant wave.

"Jerk," Alexandra muttered, and elbowed him in the ribs.

"Jerk!" echoed Charlie, from inside the travel cage in which the raven was unhappily confined.

But Alexandra couldn't help smiling. They were really going!

They walked past a row of metal doors with a large sign over them saying, 'Portkeys.' Alexandra paused, wondering what those were.

Then Maximilian called, "Alex!" sounding impatient, and she quickened her pace to catch up to him.

"Tickets, please," requested a dry, reedy voice, and Alexandra pulled her gaze away from the train window. She'd had her nose almost pressed against it for the last twenty minutes, since they had first left the station, much to her brother's amusement. They had now left the city limits and were traveling around the southern tip of Lake Michigan.

Like the Automagicka, the Wizardrail appeared to connect with the Muggle transportation network at critical junctures, and then branch off on hidden crossovers to tracks that Muggles had either forgotten or never noticed. Their train hurtled through a residential neighborhood, and at one point seemed to be squeezing between houses, with only inches to spare on either side. Yet Alexandra saw children playing in the yards and, through the windows of their houses, people watching TV or eating lunch, and none of them looked up at the train speeding by. They went over small streams and canals, and Alexandra saw streets flashing by beneath them, too, indicating the train was crossing overpasses as it left the city, and yet she couldn't see the bridges that had to be holding it up. She never heard the train blow its horn, either; apparently there was no need to warn Muggles that it was coming. She never saw any crossing barriers blocking cars, or any other sign that the Roanoke Underhill disturbed the Muggle world at all with its passing.

Alexandra and Maximilian had their own small private compartment, with two long cushioned benches and a table between them, much like the booths on the Charmbridge Bus, but larger and more luxurious. She hadn't heard the door to their compartment slide open, but when she turned at the sound of the voice, she saw there was now an ancient-looking elf wearing a dark blue uniform with a tiny cap, holding an enormous silver ticket-puncher.

Maximilian handed the elf his ticket, and the small creature took it, inserted it into the puncher, and squeezed. It made a crisp sound, and the elf handed the ticket back with an irregular hole punched through it, and then looked at Alexandra. She fished her gold-foil

ticket out of her pocket, and handed it to the elf, which he also punched and handed back.

Maximilian tossed the elf a coin, which he caught with such deftness Alexandra almost didn't see it disappear into his pocket. He bowed low, mumbling, "Thank you, sir, miss," and then stepped back and allowed the door to slide shut again. Alexandra glanced at her ticket – the hole seemed to be in the shape of a star – and then back at the space where the elf had been standing.

"He was wearing a uniform," she said.

Maximilian nodded. "So?"

"I thought elves are freed if they're given clothing."

"Porter-elves always wear uniforms," Maximilian replied.

"Are they paid?"

"Only in tips. You don't have to tip them, but only cheapskates or hard-line traditionalists refuse to. I think they buy snacks and fancier buttons for their uniforms and things."

Alexandra nodded, musing. "So they're slaves, like the Charmbridge elves?"

"Slaves?" Maximilian frowned at her. "We don't call them that, and they don't like being called that."

"But it's what they are, isn't it?"

Maximilian's frown deepened. "Have you been listening to Washington? He's one of those ASPEW goblins, isn't he?"

"He's kind of touchy about elves, yeah," Alexandra replied. She was a little annoyed by Maximilian's dismissive snort. "So how do porter-elves stay enslaved if they have uniforms?"

"I don't know. Why don't you ask one?" Maximilian shrugged, and Alexandra realized he had never thought about it, because it just wasn't important to him.

"Do you think the way elves are enslaved is one of the reasons our father wants to overthrow the Confederation?" Alexandra asked.

Maximilian's frown became a look of concern. "Alex," he said. "What our father wants is irrelevant. His plans have brought nothing but ruin. Don't start admiring him because you've got a soft heart for elves. I doubt he cares about them."

Alexandra was surprised at the bitterness in Maximilian's voice. "Usually you defend him."

He shook his head. "I don't think he's evil. I think you deserve to know your father. That doesn't mean I think he's right."

"Do you think he really cares about us?"

Maximilian regarded her for several long moments, then answered, "He cares. In his own way. But he's always put his own ambitions ahead of his family."

She frowned and looked out the window. "He doesn't seem to mind that you're helping the Office of Special Inquisitions."

Maximilian didn't say anything to that.

"So how's your mission going?" she asked, turning to look at him again.

He had a weary expression. "Alex..." Then the train went dark, for several seconds, before lights began glowing softly in their compartment. Alexandra looked outside, but all she could see through the window was darkness. "What happened?" she asked, wondering if Wizardrail trains could have power failures or accidents.

"We've gone underground," Maximilian replied. "We'll be underground for most of the trip to Roanoke."

“Underground? You mean there's a train tunnel all the way from Chicago to Roanoke?” she asked, amazed.

“Actually, there's some complicated magic involved. I don't think a tunnel was drilled all the way across the country. But I'm afraid you won't see much out the window now.” He took out a deck of cards and smiled at her. “How about a game of Exploding Snap?”

They played cards for a while, and then a porter-elf knocked on the door again, this time bringing their lunches on a pair of covered silver platters. He bowed low upon entering the compartment, and then bowed again after Maximilian tossed him another coin as he exited. Alexandra uncovered the platters, and found a Muggle-fried catfish fillet on a bed of rice, with a side of greens. For dessert there was a slice of witch-apple pie on a magical Warm Plate, and a little scoop of Wyland West's 99-Flavored Ice Cream (so labeled in the little charmed glass bowl in which it was sealed, where it would remain frozen until Alexandra lifted the lid) for dessert.

As they ate, Alexandra sipped her Fizzy-Pop and then took out the book she'd brought along with her: *The Lands Below, and Other Native Muggle Tales*.

Maximilian glanced at it, saw the title, and gave her a narrow look. She raised an eyebrow at him.

“I told you to forget about things that don't concern you,” he grumbled.

“It's just a children's book,” she replied innocently.

“Do you really expect me to believe you're suddenly interested in Indian fairy tales?”

“Do you really think you can distract me with a game of Exploding Snap?”

He stared at her, and then closed his eyes and leaned back in his seat, looking very weary again.

"I just want to help, Max," she said quietly. "Let me do research, look up spells, something – if you told me what you need..."

"What I need, is to enjoy this time with my family, and not think about Dark Arts or the Mors Mortis Society or my troublesome little sister involving herself in things that I don't enjoy being involved in. Or worse, telling my other sister about it and making everyone unhappy." He opened his eyes and fixed her with an accusing stare.

Alexandra's implicit inclusion in 'my family' made her heart swell a little, and that made the guilt generated by his words sting all the more. She looked down, and slid the book back into her bag.

"You and Julia are going to be great friends," Maximilian predicted. "You're both vexing and wicked."

Alexandra snickered. She'd seen pictures of Julia – she looked very pretty, with hair that was not quite as dark as Alexandra's, and a rounder face and softer cheekbones, and Maximilian had talked about her, but Alexandra was more nervous about meeting her half-sister than she wanted to admit. Maximilian said Julia was "more feminine" than her (she wasn't sure whether he'd been teasing her or not), but that she was also smart and stubborn and liked to get her way. Alexandra was afraid either they would indeed become great friends, or else not get along at all.

They passed the rest of the time talking about Roanoke, and the winged horse farm, and Julia and their mother, or else reading or napping. Now and then, the Roanoke Underhill would surface to stop at another Wizardrail station. The names were mostly unfamiliar, and Alexandra couldn't tell where they were by looking out the window at the stations, though she saw many more witches and wizards who looked like Old Colonials as they went further east. After they passed Appalachia and dived underground once again, Maximilian said they were in Roanoke Territory. They emerged from beneath the mountains to stop at Dominion Station, where about half of the train's passengers disembarked. They proceeded onwards, above ground for the rest of the trip, and Alexandra became more excited, and more nervous, as the end of the line approached.

The Blacksburg Wizardrail station was the debarkment point for both BMI and New Roanoke, as well as travelers heading to nearby Muggle cities. One of the uniformed porter-elves followed her and Maximilian, floating their luggage with a Hovering Charm, though Alexandra insisted on carrying Charlie's cage herself. Charlie was now squawking loudly, eager to be let out, and Alexandra noticed many of the passers-by at the station giving her and her familiar odd, suspicious looks.

Blacksburg was much smaller than Chicago, and so was the Wizardrail station. Among the witches and wizards boarding and leaving the train, Alexandra saw the usual assortment of robes and cloaks, as well as witches in frilly hoop skirts and wizards in what looked like old-fashioned dinner jackets or tailcoats. She was glad Maximilian had told her to throw a robe on over her jeans and t-shirt; she didn't see anyone else wearing Muggle clothing. Here and there were other kids wearing BMI uniforms, and a couple nodded to Maximilian in recognition.

The porter-elf waited patiently, while Maximilian paused and looked around. And then someone squealed, "Max!"

A girl in fluttering lilac robes came running and practically leaped into Maximilian's arms. He caught her and laughed, while she kissed his cheek and giggled as he spun her about.

"It's only been three months, Julia," he said, setting her down.

"So?" she demanded, and kissed his cheek again. Then she turned to face Alexandra.

Julia King looked much like her pictures – except prettier, Alexandra thought. Her dark brown hair was tied with a ribbon that matched the one cinching her dress in a bow, and she was wearing makeup and a pair of sparkling earrings. She was barely taller than Alexandra, but she had a more girlish figure, and in her dress and makeup, she looked like a young woman. Alexandra felt like a little kid.

Then the older girl wrapped her arms around Alexandra in a hug as enthusiastic as the one she'd given Maximilian. Alexandra couldn't

return it, as she was still holding Charlie's cage, so she blinked, exhaling with surprise and staring at Maximilian, who just grinned.

“Alexandra! I'm so happy you'll be spending the week here! Maximilian has told me all about you. I've been so looking forward to meeting you.”

“Really?” Alexandra gasped, as her half-sister squeezed her tightly, and then released her.

“Of course!” Julia stood back, still with her hands on Alexandra's shoulders, and looked her up and down. Alexandra wondered if the other girl was finding her appearance wanting – she was rumpled, tired after their train ride, and wearing only a simple robe over her Muggle clothes. Her sneakers and the bottoms of her jeans were visible beneath it, and her hair, not as long as Julia's, hung straight without any kind of styling or ribbons. But Julia just grinned at her, and said, “You do look like Max, a little.”

“I do?” Alexandra stared back at her.

Julia nodded, and pushed Alexandra's hair back from her ears. “You have such straight hair. But your skin is much fairer than ours. And your eyes! Oh, I can't wait to dress you up for the Cotillion!”

“The what?” Alexandra stammered.

“Ahem.” Maximilian cleared his throat loudly. “She's not one of your dolls, Julia. And we haven't talked about the Cotillion. What makes you think either of you are going?”

“Oh, you great awful snarly!” Julia retorted, then she winked at Alexandra and gave her another hug. “We're going to have so much fun! I want to know all about Muggles and how they dress and what it's like to ride in those little cars, and what Muggle boys are like, and oh, I'll bet you've never ridden a winged horse, have you? And you can tell me if Max has been nice to you, or a horrible beast like he usually is!” This last was said in a whisper that was not really a whisper.

“Ahem,” Maximilian repeated.

“Ahem,” Charlie echoed.

Julia started, and so did Alexandra, as Charlie mimicked Maximilian almost perfectly. Julia stared down at the cage as if just noticing it. “You really do have a raven familiar!” she exclaimed, and for a moment, Alexandra thought she was about to be dismayed or horrified, but then she clasped her hands together, and knelt to look through the metal bars at Charlie.

“Hello there!” she cooed, in sweet, sing-song voice. “Hello, pretty bird! Can you talk?”

“Bird-brain,” Charlie cooed back.

Julia blinked in astonishment. Alexandra flushed, and glared at Charlie. Maximilian seemed to be trying to suppress laughter.

Julia stood up, and smiled. “You’re so lucky!” she enthused. “I wish I had a familiar!” She took Alexandra’s free hand, and grabbed Maximilian’s with her other. “Come on! Mother is waiting for us in the carriage!”

The Blacksburg Wizardrail station seemed to be out in the woods, with no Muggle town nearby. There were four dirt roads leading away from it. Lanterns were hung around the station, and more were floating above the crossroads, as the sun was setting. There were a few brooms and flying carpets taking off, carrying their riders off in all directions. Alexandra saw a car, too – something that looked like an old Model-T, but with the tires of a sports car. And there was a small white bus with a sign that said, ‘Blacksburg Magery Institute,’ which some of the uniformed BMI students were boarding. But Julia led Alexandra and Maximilian down the wooden steps of the train station to a large, black, open-top horse carriage, and Alexandra paused to gape – not at the woman sitting in the carriage, but at the horse in front of it.

It would be generous to call the thing a horse, Alexandra thought. It was a horrendous, skeletal creature, black and leathery, with a face

that looked more like some kind of dragon. It did have wings, though. She stopped and made a face. The beast was just standing there, quietly harnessed to the carriage.

"What's wrong?" Maximilian asked.

Alexandra looked at him, and then back at the emaciated creature. "Do all winged horses look like that?" she asked. "It looks like it's almost starved to death."

Maximilian's mouth tightened.

"You can see it?" Julia asked quietly, and Alexandra stared at her in surprise.

"Of course I can. It's standing right there!" She pointed. "Can't you?"

Julia shook her head, and her expression was odd – almost sad – as she looked at Alexandra.

"Not everyone can see them," said a deep, rich voice, and Alexandra turned towards the woman who had stepped down from the carriage. "Especially at your age."

Ms. King was a large, imposing woman, and she was quite beautiful, Alexandra thought. She was older than Alexandra's own mother, and much taller. She had a Junoesque figure, and wavy black hair spilling loosely around her shoulders, unlike Julia's carefully brushed and tied coiffure. She studied Alexandra a moment, and then pulled her into an embrace. Alexandra's head was momentarily pressed against the witch's large bosom, and then Ms. King let go of her and looked her up and down, much as Julia had.

"I can certainly see your father in you," she said quietly, and Alexandra shuffled uneasily, but there was no trace of bitterness in the woman's voice. "Welcome to Roanoke, Alexandra. You are our guest, and you will be treated like family here."

"Thank you," Alexandra murmured. "Thank you for letting me come."

Ms. King smiled gently, then turned to indicate the skeletal winged horse. "This is a Thestral," she said, "and no, most of our horses don't look like that. Thestrals are a rare breed and we only have a few of them."

"We mostly raise Granians," Julia interjected, and then pouted, as her mother gave her an admonishing look for the interruption.

Ms. King nodded. "You'll get to see the Granians later. Don't be alarmed by the Thestral's appearance. They aren't starving, I assure you, and contrary to old superstitions, they are neither Dark creatures nor unlucky. But they are invisible to most people, Muggles and witches alike." She regarded Alexandra with eyes as dark and serious as Maximilian's. "Only someone who has witnessed death can see them."

"Oh," Alexandra said quietly.

She felt Maximilian's hand on her shoulder, and Julia's eyes on her, and then Ms. King said, a little more brusquely, "Well, shall we get in the carriage rather than making this poor elf stand here all evening?"

Alexandra started, and looked at the forgotten porter-elf guiltily, though the elf immediately bowed and demurred, "Moos does not mind, Missus."

Moos levitated their bags into the carriage, and thanked Ms. King profusely when she handed him a gold Lion. Maximilian sat in front with his mother, and Alexandra and Julia took the back seat. Alexandra unlatched Charlie's cage, and the raven immediately fluttered out and took off, cawing joyfully at the freedom and the opportunity to stretch wings confined too long in a cage.

"Don't worry," Alexandra said, noticing Julia's look of concern as Charlie flapped off into the evening sky. "Charlie's my familiar."

"Familiars always return to you." Ms. King nodded from the front seat. "And ravens are wise birds. They don't get lost."

They rode through the woods, and Julia did most of the talking. She alternated between asking Maximilian and Alexandra about Charmbridge Academy. She knew Beatrice, and Martin, and laughed when Alexandra mentioned Darla Dearborn's unfortunate infatuation.

"I had a crush on Martin when I was ten," Julia confided.

Alexandra wrinkled her nose. "You're kidding."

"All those years ago," Maximilian commented dryly, from the front seat.

Julia made a face at him, then turned back to Alexandra. "You must admit, Martin is cute!"

"I guess," Alexandra muttered.

"Enough about Martin and the silly girls who have crushes on him," Maximilian grumbled. "He encourages them."

"You should talk," Alexandra replied. "How embarrassing is it that two of my friends have a crush on you?"

Julia giggled. "Really?"

Maximilian shook his head. "I don't encourage them."

"Ladies," Alexandra intoned, dropping her pitch to try to imitate the deep, serious voice with which he had greeted the Pritchards. Julia swayed in her seat, clutching Alexandra's arm and laughing out loud.

"Fine, next time I won't be polite to them!" Maximilian growled.

"Ooh, showing his temper already!" Julia teased.

"Enough bickering, children," said Ms. King sedately. "I'd like Alexandra to see your best behavior, not your worst."

Alexandra was actually enjoying the 'bickering' between Julia and Maximilian – it was obvious that they both loved it. But she became aware suddenly of a salty breeze blowing in her face, as the woods fell away behind them. In the darkening gray gloom ahead, she saw nothing. They seemed to be plunging into a fog bank.

“Umm,” she questioned, as she felt the ground under their wheels become soft and yielding, “are we heading towards the ocean?”

“Well, of course,” Julia replied. “Didn't Max tell you?”

Alexandra could hear surf now. The closest she'd ever gotten to an ocean was Lake Michigan. “Tell me what?”

Ahead, she saw the Thestral spread its wings and plunge forward into the gray mist. Its bat-like wings were flapping now, and it felt as if the ground had dropped away beneath them altogether. Alexandra leaned over the side of the carriage, and saw waves below.

“Croatoa is on an island,” Julia informed her. “I do hope you're right about Charlie being able to find you again.”

Croatoa

Their flight over the waves did not take long, but by the time they reached a wooded shore, Alexandra was able to look back and see the glow of a Muggle lighthouse, what seemed like an awfully long way off. They had to be at least a few miles offshore.

The Thestral pulled the carriage along a path Alexandra couldn't see. "There are about a dozen ranches and plantations on the island," Julia was explaining, as they glided swiftly through the dark woods. "Ours is the largest, but we're more secluded. There's also a Muggle town on the southern end – the locals know better than to wander around the island, but sometimes tourists from the mainland come here and get themselves into trouble. New Roanoke is just across the sound."

Alexandra nodded, wondering what sort of 'trouble' a Muggle tourist might run into here. She didn't think winged horses were dangerous, so there must be other magical creatures about. Or maybe Julia meant discovering a wizarding plantation, and having their memories Obliviated.

"If you get homesick for Muggle things, I'm sure Mother will take us into town," Julia went on.

"She's hoping you'll get homesick, as an excuse to go into town herself," Maximilian said. "So she can watch Muggle boys."

"I am not interested in Muggle boys!" Julia retorted.

"Hah."

"Not that there's anything wrong with Muggle boys," she added, when she noticed Alexandra frowning a little.

Maximilian snickered, and then Ms. King admonished, "That's quite enough, both of you."

"I don't think I'll be homesick, but thank you," Alexandra said.

The woods began to thin, and they seemed to be heading uphill. Alexandra saw some lights blink rapidly in the trees ahead of them, and she thought she saw shadowy figures scurrying about in the branches overhead, and then they were in a clearing, and the Thestral was pulling them up a long road that led directly to a house at the top of a hill.

Although Maximilian never talked much about their wealth, Alexandra had already figured out that the Kings were well off. It wasn't until they arrived at their home that she realized how wealthy they must be. The plantation-style mansion before them was nearly the size of one of Charmbridge's seven wings. It glowed like a beacon on the hill, surrounded by woods on three sides and a bluff overlooking the sea on the fourth. Lanterns were hung along the path to the great columnar entrance, and light glowed through all the windows from within. Alexandra couldn't imagine just three people living in such a huge residence.

She met some of the other occupants when they were greeted on the steps of the plantation house by a pair of house-elves.

"Master Maximilian!" squeaked a house-elf wearing what looked like it had once been a doll's dress and bonnet. "We is so happy you is back!"

"And you has brought another sister!" said the other elf, this one with dark, wrinkled skin, peering at Alexandra with a frankly curious gaze. There was a stained red cloth wrapped around the little elf, but Alexandra had no idea what it might once have been. "Welcome, welcome to Croatoa!"

"It's good to see you too, Nina," said Maximilian, swinging down from the carriage and hurrying around it to help his mother out, though Ms. King didn't actually seem to need the help. He then held up a hand for Julia, who took it as she stepped down. Alexandra hopped out on the other side, rather than waiting for Julia to exit. She walked around the back of the carriage, still carrying Charlie's cage, and came to a halt as she found the elf in the red cloth had come running to intercept her.

“Please, let Gun-gun carry Miss's things!” the elf begged, holding out his skinny arms.

“I can...” Alexandra started to protest, but the elf's expression was so pleading, she handed the cage to him. He smiled happily at her, then glanced at the empty cage with a slightly puzzled expression. “Is Miss, er, missing something?”

“That's my familiar's cage,” Alexandra explained. “Charlie will be back.” She reached into her pocket and found an Eagle, which she handed to the elf. Gun-gun stared at it in horror.

“It's all right, Gun-gun. She's Mugg – she's not used to house-elves,” Maximilian said hastily, moving to Alexandra's side. He gently pushed her hand down. Gun-gun nodded, and bounded up the steps to the entrance of the house, with surprising speed for such a wizened old elf.

“You don't tip house-elves,” Maximilian told her. “Have you ever tipped an elf at Charmbridge?”

“No,” Alexandra said. “But...”

“Porter-elves are different.” He shook his head, with a small smile. “Don't worry about it. You'll get used to things around here.”

Julia was waiting for them, so Alexandra followed them into the mansion, as several more house-elves came out and began unhitching the carriage, while one took the Thestral's reins.

The inside of the mansion was luxurious, with opulent carpets, plush furniture, and crystal chandeliers in almost every room. Everything looked very old-fashioned, yet it could have been newly manufactured; it was all so spotless. Alexandra started to feel herself shrinking in this vast house.

“Deezie,” said Ms. King, snapping her fingers, and yet another house-elf appeared out of thin air, with a crack. This was another female elf, wearing clean, starched, but tattered rags, and what looked like a tangle of yarn knotted around her head. She had droopy ears that

gave her a sad appearance at first glance, but her eyes were bright and eager.

"This is Alexandra," Ms. King told the elf. "Please show her to her room, and help her with anything she needs." The lady of the manor looked at Alexandra. "Deezie will be at your beck and call at all times while you are here."

The little elf nodded enthusiastically, almost shaking loose an unraveling strand of yarn. "Just snap your fingers, Miss," Deezie said, in a high-pitched voice, snapping her own fingers to demonstrate, "and Deezie will be there, snap-snap-snap!"

"Er, thank you," Alexandra replied.

"Deezie has already prepared a room for you – it's right next to mine, and down the hall from Max's," said Julia.

"All your things is there already," piped Deezie. "If you tells Deezie how you wants things kept, Deezie will make everything perfect, snap-snap-snap!"

"Alexandra might like a hot bath after her trip," Ms. King suggested.

"Yes, Mistress!" Deezie exclaimed, and disappeared with another crack.

"Please feel free to rest a bit, Alexandra. Dinner will be served in about an hour." Ms. King smiled at her. "We'll have all week to get to know each other, and show you around the island."

"And the Cotillion, Mother!" Julia wheedled. "We are going to go to the Cotillion, aren't we?"

"Julia," Maximilian hissed, under his breath, but Ms. King smiled patiently.

"We'll talk about that later, Julia. Let's not overwhelm the poor girl. You can see this is all new to her."

Chagrined, Alexandra straightened her posture, and tried to look less overwhelmed. Then Julia grabbed her wrist, and said, "Come! I'll show you your room! Deezie will be drawing you a bath now." And she began pulling Alexandra up a grand, spiral staircase to a hallway lined with picture frames, as Maximilian followed behind them.

Some of the pictures were wizarding photographs, but there were magical portraits, too, and these greeted Julia and Maximilian by name.

"Max, my boy! Back from school already?" asked one old wizard, with a white beard reaching to his waist.

"Only for a week, Great-Grandpa," Maximilian replied.

"And who's this?" asked an ancient crone wearing a high-collared chemise under a pointed bodice, with her hair tucked beneath a brocaded coif. She eyed Alexandra critically. "Maximilian, there is wisdom in choosing a young bride, but she looks barely out of the cradle!"

Alexandra sputtered in outrage, but Julia just smiled and shook her head, winking at the younger girl. Maximilian responded, "She's not my bride, Great-Aunt," and Julia pulled her onward.

"That's Great-Aunt Virginia," Julia whispered. "She's actually a many-times-great aunt. She's always pestering Max about marriage, and now she's starting on me." Julia rolled her eyes.

"It's annoying," Maximilian grumbled.

"I know the feeling." Alexandra smirked at him.

Maximilian gave her a narrow look and shook his head, and then he opened one of the doors in the hallway and said, "I'll see you two at dinner. Try not to concoct too much wickedness." He turned aside and entered his bedroom, and Julia led her to another door. It opened before either of them touched the knob.

Alexandra entered, and looked around in shock. It was larger than her living room at home. There was an immense canopy bed, with quilted sheets and drapes that looked suitable for visiting royalty. At the foot of the bed was a wooden chest that was almost waist-height. A large mirrored vanity table sat along one wall, next to a grand, polished wooden dresser. A writing desk, with parchment and quills and ink already laid out on it, sat before one of the windows. Alexandra couldn't see any of her things, except for Charlie's cage, which was now dangling by a chain from a tall metal post next to the window. She went over to the window and opened it, and leaned outside. A cool sea breeze blew across her face, and she could hear chirps, hoots, croaks, and a hundred other noises flooding into her room from the surrounding woods.

"Oh, you'd better ward your room if you're going to leave the window open," Julia warned. She drew her wand and pointed it at the window. "Repello Vermis." A yellow mist sprayed from her wand and whooshed past Alexandra, and then Julia walked around the room, repeating the charm until she'd covered the entire room. "The mosquitoes will eat you alive, otherwise."

"Gotta learn that one," Alexandra commented. She sniffed the air, but couldn't smell anything from the yellow spray.

Julia turned back to her. "So," she asked, spreading her arms, "do you like it? If there's anything you need, just ask either me or Mother, or one of the elves. Deezie will take good care of you."

"Just like Deezie took care of Miss Julia when she was a baby," said Deezie. Alexandra hadn't even heard the house-elf, but she was suddenly standing behind her.

"All of Miss Alexandra's things is in the closet or folded in drawers," Deezie went on, gesturing at a large door that Alexandra had thought went into another hallway. "And her bath is ready. Snap-snap-snap!" Deezie snapped her fingers at yet another door, and it opened, revealing a white-tiled floor.

Alexandra was still trying to take it all in. She looked at Julia, who was waiting for an answer, and smiled. "It's fine," she told her. "I mean, everything looks great."

Julia smiled, and gave her another hug. "Oh, Alexandra, I'm so glad you're here! I always wished I had a sister I could actually talk to."

"I'm glad I'm here, too," replied Alexandra, hugging Julia back a little uncertainly. Julia's bubbly personality and unreserved affection was a startling contrast to Maximilian's careful, quiet intensity.

The older girl stepped back. "Take your time, enjoy your bath. We can talk and concoct wickedness later!" She winked. Alexandra grinned, and Julia exited the room.

Alexandra walked into the bathroom, with Deezie at her heels. It was a spacious, marble-tiled room, dominated by an old-fashioned, claw-footed bathtub, which was now filled with steaming water topped with a thick layer of bubbles. Alexandra was used to showers, but she didn't see a shower head. She shrugged, and pulled off her robe, and then turned to find Deezie still standing there.

"Thanks," she said, and the elf bobbed her head and remained where she was, looking up at her.

"Umm." Alexandra shuffled uncomfortably. "I don't need anything else, thank you."

"Isn't Miss Alexandra going to take a bath?" Deezie asked.

Alexandra's forehead wrinkled. "Yes," she answered slowly. Deezie nodded, and picked up a back-scrubber and a sponge. Alexandra realized, with dawning horror, that the house-elf meant to attend to her while she was in the bath!

"Does Miss Alexandra need help getting undressed?" the elf asked, frowning a little at Alexandra's Muggle clothing.

“No!” Alexandra said quickly. She was afraid that Deezie might make her clothes disappear with a snap of her fingers, but felt guilty when the elf winced at her tone.

“I... I'm used to bathing myself, thank you,” she stammered. Deezie blinked at her, and looked a little hurt.

“Can you do me a favor, Deezie?” Alexandra asked, and the elf nodded her head anxiously.

“I'm worried about my raven. Charlie always finds the way back to me, but this place is unfamiliar...”

“Deezie can tell the other house-elves to watch for Miss Alexandra's raven,” said the elf.

“And maybe you could have some food waiting? Charlie might be hungry – any kitchen scraps will do. Ravens can eat practically anything –”

“Deezie will fix breadcrumbs and cheese crumbles, and corn, and there is some nice fish in the Thau-Ma-Freeze...”

“Charlie will like that,” Alexandra assured her, gratefully.

Deezie nodded, then looked at the scrubber and sponge in her hands. “Is Miss Alexandra sure she does not want Deezie to scrub her back and do her hair?”

Alexandra shook her head rapidly. “No, thanks. Really.”

Deezie nodded, and set down the bath implements. “If Miss Alexandra needs anything...”

“Right,” Alexandra said, holding up her fingers. “Snap-snap-snap.”

Deezie beamed, and disappeared with a crack.

Dinner was delicious: roast pork, red potatoes with gravy, sweet corn, and spinach (which Alexandra pushed under a piece of bread). It was served by house-elves.

"How many house-elves do you have here?" Alexandra asked, as another loaf of fresh-baked bread materialized on the table, replacing the crust and crumbs that had just disappeared.

"Six," Ms. King replied.

"We grew up with them," said Julia. "They're like part of the family."

"They've all lived here since before Maximilian was born," Ms. King went on. "Three were in my family before I was married, and Abraham brought the other three with him. When he left, he told them to stay here, and they did."

"We was happy to stay with Mistress and our young Miss and Master," said Rolly, who looked like the youngest of the house-elves, as he appeared with a hot pie in each hand for dessert.

Alexandra nodded. Neither Ms. King nor her children seemed to find Abraham Thorn a sore subject around the dinner table, but Alexandra wasn't feeling comfortable enough to ask questions about him yet. She thanked Rolly as he offered her a slice of pie. He gave her an ingenuous smile, and she wondered what David would think of her sitting at a table being waited on hand and foot by half a dozen house-elves. Actually, she knew what he would think.

Ms. King seemed very well-informed about what her children were up to. She knew, for example, about Maximilian being demoted a rank for getting Alexandra hurt. Maximilian looked flustered, as he tried to stammer his way through an explanation. Julia was much too interested.

"It was kind of my fault," Alexandra interrupted. "I really didn't like Max, at first – actually, before I found out he was my brother, I thought he was a jerk." Julia and Ms. King frowned a little at the unfamiliar expression, but nodded. "So I wouldn't listen to anything he said. In

fact, I'd do the opposite of anything he said. That's how I wound up flying into a tree."

Everyone was silent, staring at her. Then Ms. King smiled. "Maximilian can be a bit... overbearing, can't he?" Maximilian flushed.

Julia giggled. "And gorgons can be a bit ugly!"

"Julia," her mother warned, while Maximilian glared at her, but Ms. King was still smiling. "I'm glad you weren't more seriously hurt, Alexandra, and that Maximilian did finally see fit to tell you about your father. Honestly, Maximilian, you spend so much time brooding and overthinking things sometimes." She shook her head. "But you should have been more responsible."

"I'm sure you'll get your stripe back soon," Julia soothed, patting her brother's hand, her tone shifting from teasing to sympathetic.

Julia attended the Salem Witches Institute, which apparently Ms. King had also attended, as she knew many of Julia's teachers. Alexandra wondered what it would be like to go to an all-girls school. She looked narrowly at Maximilian. She was sure he'd approve.

They only asked Alexandra a few questions about her life in Larkin Mills that night, and Ms. King stopped Julia before she could continue interrogating her, although Alexandra really didn't mind.

"Tomorrow, we'll show you the Granians," Julia promised, as they walked back upstairs to their rooms.

"Can we ride them?" Alexandra asked.

"Oh, yes!" Julia nodded.

"You two get some sleep," Maximilian told them. "Don't keep her up all night talking, Julia."

"You get some sleep yourself and don't tell us what to do!" Julia declared, turning around to give her brother a push. He caught her arms, and she squealed as he picked her up.

“Let go of me, blaggard!”

Maximilian walked as far as the door to Julia's room, and then set her down. Alexandra followed, watching the two siblings play-fight, fascinated and a little envious. Julia took out her wand, and said, “I've learned the Bat-Bogey Hex, you big snarly buffoon!”

“I can shove your wand up your nose before you cast it,” Maximilian replied.

“You're awful! I thought Charmbridge was supposed to be more refined and genteel than Blackburg! Your manners haven't improved one bit!”

That Charmbridge was supposed to be 'refined' and 'genteel' was news to Alexandra, but Maximilian just grinned. Obviously, neither of them were taking the other one's threats seriously. Maximilian leaned over and kissed Julia on the cheek. Despite her affected outrage, she didn't turn away.

“Good night, Julia,” he said.

“Good night, blaggard!” Julia replied, giving him a quick peck on the cheek in return.

He walked back down the hallway, and paused when he was in front of Alexandra.

“Is your room all right?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Get some sleep.” He reached out and tousled her hair. “Good night, Troublesome.”

“Troublesome?” Julia giggled.

Alexandra shoved his hand away and smoothed down her hair angrily. “Good night, jerk!”

He grinned, and went into his own room.

“You should sleep,” Julia agreed. “You’ve had a long trip, and it’s a new place, so you’re probably nervous and a little excited, which means it will take you a long time to fall asleep. At least, that’s the way I am.” She lowered her voice. “But tomorrow night we can stay up late and talk, if you like, and you can tell me everything that Max won’t about Charmbridge and what he’s been like, and your friends...”

Alexandra nodded. “I’d like that.” Though as much as she’d like to confide in her sister, she knew there were things she couldn’t tell Julia either.

Julia smiled happily, and gave Alexandra another hug. “Good night, Alexandra. Can I call you ‘little sister’? Oh, I’m joking!” She laughed, and kissed her younger sister on the cheek.

Alexandra was too flustered to say more than, “Good night.” Julia practically skipped into her room, with a little wave.

Alexandra felt many things as she entered her own room, but tired was one of them. A squawk greeted her, and she found Charlie sitting on the dresser, gorging on a platter full of raven treats that Deezie had set out.

“Charlie!” Despite her confident words earlier, Alexandra had been a little bit worried. Charlie had never flown over the ocean, and she hadn’t really been certain that the raven could find her on an island. She just hadn’t wanted to appear anxious around the Kings.

She walked to the dresser and held her arm up insistently. Charlie looked reluctant to leave the feast, but hopped onto her arm, and croaked, “Alexandra.”

Alexandra brought Charlie to her cheek and nuzzled the bird. “Do you like it here?” she asked.

Charlie made the soft clucking sound that Alexandra knew signified contentment, pecked her cheek gently, and then hopped onto the top

of her head, and from there back to the dresser top, diving back into the platter of breadcrumbs and fish.

“Greedy-gut!” Alexandra laughed quietly. She closed the window, and changed into pajamas. As Julia had predicted, though, it took her a while to fall asleep.

She found Deezie waiting at her bedside the next morning, and was unable to persuade the house-elf that she didn't need or want help choosing clothes. She did finally manage to shoo her away before she could brush or tie or braid Alexandra's hair. She stumbled downstairs to breakfast, to find that once again the table had been set by the house-elves, and an enormous meal had been laid out for them.

Ms. King lived alone in the mansion, except for the house-elves, when her children were away at school, but house-elves and one witch couldn't run a winged horse ranch. Alexandra met Myrta Applegate and Samuel Hunter after breakfast. Myrta was a chubby young woman with stringy blonde hair, only a few years older than Maximilian. She was perfunctory in her greetings, when introduced to Alexandra, and seemed in a hurry to get back to work. Samuel Hunter, an old wizard with bristly gray sideburns and a straw farmer's hat, was more friendly. Both of them had their own private residences on the Kings' land, and worked at the ranch full-time.

Granians were large, gray horses, with beautiful birdlike wings. There were thirteen of them at Croatoa, including a foal that had been born since Julia and Maximilian had last been home. They stayed in a stable the size of an airplane hangar, with a roof that folded away magically to allow them to fly in and out. Alexandra had a million questions. How did they get the winged horses back into the stable? What kept them from flying away to the mainland? How did they keep Muggles from seeing them? Could they fly as fast as they ran? How smart were they?

The three teenagers followed Sam around, as he answered Alexandra's questions patiently. Maximilian ambled along behind them, amused. Julia suddenly ran ahead, calling, “Misoo!” A large winged mare whickered and flapped her wings, and turned to greet

the girl. Julia wrapped her arms around the horse's neck, and fished an apple from the pocket of her outdoor robe.

"That's her horse," Sam explained. "Misoo was born the same week Julia was."

Julia continued stroking the horse's neck, then beckoned Alexandra over. Alexandra approached the horse without fear.

"She likes it when you rub her nose," Julia said, and Alexandra reached up to do so. Misoo snorted softly.

"Let's bring Halo out," Maximilian suggested to Sam, and the old wizard nodded. Alexandra watched, as they led a smaller horse out of the stable, and Sam waved his wand and conjured a saddle out of the air.

"We'll keep her on the ground at first," said Sam, as Alexandra's eyes lit up. "Don't be over-eager, little lady. You aren't ready to take her flying yet."

"Riding a horse isn't as easy as riding a broom," Maximilian warned. "You take an attitude with a Granian, and she'll scrape you off on a tree."

Alexandra nodded. She allowed her brother to help her up, and then leaned over and whispered, "Now I know where you got the idea!" She gave Maximilian a smug grin, as he turned red and looked torn between guilt and wanting to throttle her.

They spent much of the day riding. Alexandra was eager to take off, especially after she saw Maximilian and Julia both sailing above overhead on Granians of their own, but Sam wouldn't let Halo take flight while Alexandra was on her until she had mastered the basics of earthbound horseback riding, and this was indeed somewhat more tricky than riding a broom. She thought by that afternoon that she was all right in the saddle. At least she wasn't constantly slipping and about to fall off.

Maximilian was dubious. "Tomorrow, we'll see."

Alexandra thanked Sam, who was taking the Granians they'd ridden back to the stables, where Myrta and one of the elves would help wash them. As they walked back up to the mansion, Alexandra noticed Myrta pushing a wheelbarrow full of hay. Earlier, she'd seen the young woman shoveling, carrying buckets, and climbing up a ladder to reach the side of the stable.

"Why doesn't she use magic?" she asked her half-siblings.

They both looked at her as if she'd asked an awkward question.

"Is she a Muggle?" Alexandra realized she had not seen Myrta use a wand once.

Maximilian and Julia shook their heads.

"She's a Squib, Alex," Maximilian answered.

"Oh." Alexandra had heard the term before – usually used as an insult. "Her parents were wizards, but she can't do any magic?"

Julia nodded sadly. "It happens sometimes. Myrta tried to live among Muggles, but some Squibs... even though they can't do magic, they're still just too different."

Alexandra thought about the way Myrta went about her duties, unsmiling, absorbed in her work, not interested in talking to any of them. She seemed to like the horses much better than she liked people. It must be hard living among wizards, knowing that you should be able to do magic but can't.

The house-elves, on the other hand, made Charmbridge's elves seem sullen and lazy by comparison. Alexandra could hardly shake Deezie off of her whenever she went into the house. She thought it must be partly because she was a guest – Maximilian and Julia and their mother weren't pestered so much – but there was always a house-elf somewhere nearby, ready to cater to their slightest whim with a snap of their fingers. They appeared happy, cheerful, and

eager. Alexandra thought she would look like Myrta very quickly if she were constantly at someone else's beck and call.

Ms. King told Alexandra that they might all go out riding the next day, and take a trip to New Roanoke the day after that. This led Julia to bring up the subject of the Cotillion again.

"It's just a small one, not like the Summer Cotillion or the Yule Ball," she pleaded. "How can you expect us to present ourselves at those if we've never even gotten to attend one of the little holiday dances?"

"Us?" Maximilian raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, Max, you know most of your fellow upperclassmen from BMI attend, and you can't keep being a big snarly forever. Stop being so antisocial!"

"You've never been exposed to a public gathering, Julia," said Maximilian. "A society function in the Territorial capital is not like your little all-witches school."

"No one will know who our father is," Julia argued. "We're not that important." She looked at her mother, who was listening silently, her expression unreadable. "Please, Mother!" she begged. "It will be fun! Especially for Alexandra!"

They all looked at Alexandra, who was quietly eating while she tried to work out what a 'Cotillion' was. Some sort of dance, obviously. They had school dances at Charmbridge, but they were mostly for the older students. Alexandra was not interested in dancing, and she had no idea who Julia thought she would dance with.

"You mean especially for you," Maximilian retorted. "You just want to dress up, and flirt with boys."

"Oh, horrors!" Julia gasped, clasping her hands over her chest dramatically. "I might flirt with boys! And there might be girls there who will flirt with you! Why, you might even meet a girl you like and get married!"

"I think you're skipping a few steps there," Maximilian remarked dryly.

"Enough," Ms. King said softly, and Julia and Maximilian both quieted immediately. "I will think about it."

Maximilian frowned, while Julia protested, "But Mother..."

"I said I will think about it, Julia." She didn't raise her voice at all, but Julia shut her mouth and looked down. Ms. King looked at Alexandra. "Have you ever been dancing, Alexandra?"

"No." Alexandra shook her head. Glancing at Julia, she mumbled, "I guess it might be kind of fun."

She didn't really think that at all, but she saw the corner of Julia's mouth turn up in a smile. Ms. King sipped from her wine glass, and then said, "Well, we'll see."

After dinner, they played cards. Ms. King was pleased to learn that Alexandra knew how to play Witches' Whist. Maximilian could only be persuaded to play for a little while, before he made excuses and left the game, and Ms. King retired soon after. Julia suggested they move the card game to Alexandra's room, so they went upstairs, but they were soon sitting on Alexandra's huge canopy bed, talking about Charmbridge Academy and the Salem Witches Institute, the cards forgotten.

Alexandra was curious about magical education at Salem; Julia was much more curious about social activities at Charmbridge. They talked about house-elves and familiars, and Granians and Thestrals, and finally, Alexandra began talking a little about what had happened to her last year.

Despite her bubbly personality and liking for 'girl talk,' Julia could be a quiet listener as well, and she seemed to sense that Alexandra was speaking of things that she had never really talked about before – not since her brief conversation with Ms. Grimm, following Ben Journey's attempt to kill her.

The Radicalist warlock, and one-time friend of her father, had pressed a gun to her chest and pulled the trigger, and Alexandra had watched him die, as an enchantment placed on her at birth by her father reflected Journey's murder attempt back at him. She hadn't caused it or wanted it, but she was the reason he'd died. And being bound and gagged had made the experience that much more horrible. It wasn't the memory of Ben Journey dying before her eyes that haunted her dreams, so much as the memory of being utterly helpless to save herself, and not knowing what was happening.

Julia listened, wide-eyed at times, but always sympathetically. Alexandra didn't really feel like she needed a hug when she was finished, but she didn't mind when her sister gave her one.

"That's so awful," Julia murmured. "It's terrible that that happened to you. And you were so brave! I don't know what I would have done."

"You know more magic than me. I'm sure you'd have saved yourself."

Julia shook her head. "I don't think so." She looked at Alexandra seriously. "Maximilian says you're very bold, and quite a talented witch."

"He does?" Alexandra stared at her.

Julia nodded. "He also told me not to tell you he said that. But fie on him!" She winked.

"He cares about you a lot," Alexandra said. "He's always worrying about you."

"And you too, I'll wager." Julia rolled her eyes, then sighed and leaned back on the bed. "He's such a worrier. Always so serious. Even when we were little, he felt like he had to be the man of the house, because Father wasn't here."

Julia lay on her back, making stars and bubbles she conjured with her wand dance in a sort of shimmering magical mobile over their heads, as the conversation turned to their father. Alexandra watched, her eyes drawn by the lights and the ever-shifting patterns. It was a

beautiful effect, and not like anything she'd learned at Charmbridge, though it didn't seem particularly useful.

"What do you think of him?" Alexandra asked. "Max sometimes defends him, and then sometimes he seems really angry."

Julia nodded. "Max has very mixed feelings about Father. I accept what little he offers us, but I don't expect anything more. I think our other sisters feel the same way. But Max..." Julia frowned.

"Does he try to tell you who you can date, and worry about whether you're going to get married?"

Julia burst into laughter, clasping her hands to her heart and causing the bed to shake. "Oh, Merlin, yes! He's going to be simply awful when I do get a beau! Like one of those old-fashioned warlocks who waits for the boys who come courting his daughter, boiling a cauldron of Universal Solvent in the yard!"

"So you're not worried about being Abraham Thorn's daughter?"

Julia propped herself up on her elbows, and grinned at Alexandra. "Do you have a beau?" she asked.

"No." Alexandra shook her head. "I don't want a boyfriend."

Julia laughed. "You haven't met the right boy yet, then!" She sat up, and crossed her legs, spreading her skirt across her lap. "No one at Salem knows who my father is, not even my friends. But here in Roanoke, there are a few families that know, and we've been shunned by them, even cut in public. Maximilian is very worried, that his sister – his sisters – might become social pariahs." Julia shook her head. "But I think true love won't care about your blood, don't you?"

"I guess," Alexandra replied. 'True love' was a vague and faintly silly concept to her, and 'blood' – as in, she supposed, 'bloodline,' or 'Mudblood' – was just an abstract and sillier one.

But it wasn't abstract or silly to Maximilian. He was immersing himself in Dark Arts, and possibly putting himself in danger, because he thought he had to redeem his family name, for the sake of his sisters.

Alexandra looked at her pretty, giggly, flirtatious half-sister, whom she had now known for less than two days, and who could hardly be more different from her. She thought about something bad happening to Maximilian, and what that would do to Julia.

It won't happen, she swore to herself. This little bit of family she had suddenly acquired was hers now. She was going to talk to Max, when they got back to Charmbridge. He didn't get to decide who needed to be protected and who did the protecting all by himself!

When, long after midnight, Julia gave her a final good-night hug before heading for bed, Alexandra hugged her back, with less reticence than before.

Colonials and Indians

"Do you really let them scrub your back in the tub?" Alexandra asked Julia the next morning, as they headed downstairs to breakfast. Deezie had once again been on hand from the moment she woke up, offering to help her dress, bathe, brush her hair, and even clean Charlie's cage. Alexandra was still trying to figure out how to shoo away the overly-helpful house-elf without hurting her feelings.

"Oh, not since I was eight!" Julia laughed. "And I'm sure Max doesn't either. But they miss being our nannies and playmates. If Deezie pesters you too much, you can always banish her from your room."

Alexandra frowned.

"But Olina does the most excellent braids – we should see what she can do with your hair, when we go to the Cotillion." Julia reached out to casually comb her fingers through the back of Alexandra's hair, as if considering what to do with it. Alexandra didn't really mind the touching, but the idea of 'doing something' with her hair made her uneasy.

"What are you wearing, young lady?" asked Great-Aunt Virginia from her portrait, appalled. None of the Kings' ancestors seemed to think highly of witches wearing Muggle jeans and shirts.

"It's more comfortable for riding in," Alexandra told the old woman, and then hurried downstairs so as not to receive a lecture from a painting.

"Doesn't it ever... bother you, having house-elves serving you?" she asked, in a quieter voice, as they came to the bottom of the stairs.

Julia blinked at her in surprise. "Have you been listening to those people from ASPEW?" she asked, as they entered the breakfast room. "We have a few Radicalists at Salem, too. I think they're very well-intentioned, but I've never met an ASPEW member who actually grew up with house-elves. You just don't understand them."

"Of course she doesn't. She grew up with Muggles," commented Maximilian, who was already seated at the breakfast table.

"You know, just because I grew up with Muggles doesn't make me ignorant," Alexandra retorted, annoyed.

Julia looked taken aback, and one of the other house-elves, who had just Apparated into the room with fresh coffee and a plate of serviceberry strudel, looked worried.

"Of course not." Ms. King entered the room, and Alexandra bit her tongue. Maximilian had provoked her, but she hadn't meant to criticize her hosts. "And I understand your concerns about house-elves."

"You do?" Alexandra sat down slowly, opposite Ms. King.

"Miss Alexandra should not be concerned about us," said Rolly, appearing at her side to offer her some strudel. "We is treated very well here. We love Mistress and her children."

Alexandra took a pastry, while Ms. King said, "In times past, house-elves were often treated poorly. Your father, when he was a Congressman, was one of the writers of the House-Elf Protection Act."

"Master Thorn was good to house-elves," whispered Rolly. "You don't listen to nasty people who says nasty things about Miss's father!"

"But aren't they still –" Alexandra glanced at Rolly, and bit her tongue, before the word 'slaves' could escape.

"The magic that binds them is ancient," Ms. King told her. "We can't simply undo the compact between wizards and elves by setting them all free. Surely you know that they regard that as the most horrible of punishments?"

Indeed, Rolly was now cringing.

Alexandra nodded. "But does that mean ASPEW is all wrong? They're just stupid?"

"Yes," Maximilian scoffed, but his mother gave him an admonishing look, and he closed his mouth.

"Not at all." Ms. King sipped fresh hot coffee, and set her cup down, with a smile. "They have the noblest of intentions, and they have brought about reforms. But ancient ways change only slowly, and it's not wise to rush to change things you don't understand." She studied Alexandra a moment, and then said, in a kindly tone, "You do have a lot of your father in you."

Alexandra wasn't entirely sure whether Ms. King thought that was a good thing or not.

They talked about the horses as they finished breakfast, and Julia mentioned the Cotillion again, to which her mother told her simply, "Don't pester, Julia."

In truth, Alexandra was a bit sore from the hours she'd spent horseback riding yesterday, but she was eager to resume her lessons and actually go flying. When they reached the stables, however, her siblings saddled up and then left her behind, while Mr. Hunter made her walk Halosydne in circles.

Maximilian and Julia had already taken to the air on their mounts. They were both skilled riders, soaring through the air with ease and grace. Alexandra hated feeling like a child watching the big kids play, as she trotted around the meadow on the hill, with her brother and sister circling overhead. She was no longer worried about falling off, and Halo was beginning to respond to her commands, verbal and non-verbal.

Ms. King joined them in the afternoon, just as Alexandra, impatient with what she thought were 'baby steps' being imposed by Sam, urged Halo off the ground. Her mount leaped into the air with a bemused snort, as Sam shouted at her. Girl and Granian went soaring away from the meadow and out over the forest. Halo

whinnied as she spread her wings, and Alexandra grinned. Riding a flying horse was even better than flying a broom!

Then Mr. Hunter whistled, and Halo wheeled around and descended back towards the grass at the bottom of the hill. She cleared the treetops and landed just at the edge of the forest. Alexandra sighed, as she saw the old wizard walking down the hill towards them, looking angry.

Maximilian descended from the sky on his own mount, scowling fiercely.

"You do what Sam tells you!" he yelled at her. "You don't take off on your own like that because you're impatient!"

Alexandra looked at her brother calmly, though she was perturbed to see Maximilian's temper returning. "All we did was glide around in a circle. Easier than flying a broom."

"You go flying off on a Granian before you know how to control her, you could get yourself killed!"

She smiled at him. "Not likely. I am a witch."

Maximilian's face turned red, but two more horses came in for a landing then, as Julia and her mother settled on either side of Alexandra and Halo.

"Maximilian, stop shouting at your sister," Ms. King chided. Alexandra's gratitude was short-lived, when Ms. King turned to her and said, in that same calm tone of voice, "While you're a guest here, Alexandra, I expect you to follow the rules of this household, and that includes doing as you're told by adults. If you ever disobey Mr. Hunter again, that will be the last time you ride a Granian at Croatoa. Do you understand me?"

Alexandra hung her head. "Yes," she mumbled. Being reproved by Ms. King, in front of Maximilian and Julia, was worse than being yelled at or lectured.

“Yes, ma'am,” Maximilian hissed at her.

“That's enough, Maximilian. There's no need to embarrass her further.” The King matriarch smiled at the three teenagers. “I thought Alexandra might like to see some more of the island. I've been watching, and Samuel agrees that she's ready to fly – with supervision.” She looked at Alexandra sternly. “You will follow us, and not go right or left or up or down without my say-so. Stay with us, and no stunts. Is that understood?”

“Yes, ma'am,” Alexandra replied.

Julia smiled at her, and as they all took off again, she pointed her wand at Maximilian, who was riding alongside his mother, leaving the two girls to bring up the rear. 'BIG SNARLY JERK' appeared in shiny silver letters on the back of his jacket.

Alexandra snickered. Julia giggled, and Maximilian cast a suspicious glance over his shoulder at them. When he looked ahead again, Julia winked at Alexandra, and Alexandra winked back.

The island on which Croatoa was located ran north-south, and was much narrower at the southern tip, where the Muggle town was located. On their Granians, Alexandra and the Kings had to stay close to the treetops as they flew south, and Ms. King told her they were not allowed to be airborne within sight of the town during daylight hours. They flew over several other houses, all of them big and old, but none so grand and well-maintained as Croatoa. Maximilian told Alexandra that their neighbors raised winged goats and blue bulls. She wasn't sure she believed him, but she nodded. They passed over a wizard-tobacco plantation, where most of the work seemed to be done by elves. None of them looked up at the flying riders overhead, though a young man in a sweat-soaked shirt, using his wand to cut and bundle tobacco leaves, returned a cautious wave.

“That's Fred,” said Julia. “We used to play with him and his sister, before he went off to school.”

“And before the Jameses found out who our father was,” Maximilian remarked.

Julia frowned, and looked away.

Alexandra thought she saw some structures in the woods, too – there were crumbling stone walls, and here and there, some wooden shacks, cabins, occasionally a log fence. When she asked about them, Julia shrugged. “Most of those buildings are ancient and abandoned.”

“Don't ever venture into the woods alone, Alexandra,” Ms. King told her. “It's not safe.”

She nodded, and noticed Maximilian giving her another suspicious look, as if he were worried that Alexandra would now be seized with a desire to go exploring in the woods.

When they returned to Croatoa, and landed in front of the stable, it was late in the afternoon. Alexandra and Maximilian and Julia helped Sam and the elves put the horses up this time, and then they all returned to the house to bathe before dinner. Alexandra told Deezie, one more time, that she didn't need any help bathing. The house-elf had restored her room to perfection while she was out – bed made, clothes in drawers, Charlie's cage as clean and sparkling as new, with a fresh water dish and a bowl full of food scraps, and the bathroom spotless. Alexandra grimaced as she realized that if she didn't do it herself, the elf would. Unless she banished Deezie from her room, which was tempting, except the poor elf looked unhappy enough when she was banished from the bathroom while Alexandra was in it.

I am definitely not telling David about this, she thought, as she leaned back in her tub and soaked in the hot bubble bath Deezie had prepared for her.

From Julia's room, she heard a shriek of indignation.

“YOU BEAST! YOU HORRIBLE, STEAMING PILE OF WHALE GUTS!”

From Maximilian's room came laughter.

Alexandra slid deeper into the water, and closed her eyes, with a little smile. Maximilian must have found the writing on his shirt, and done something in retribution. She and Julia would have to plot counter-revenge tonight.

Julia came down to dinner wearing a high-collared, long-sleeved robe, but Alexandra could see blue letters, like tattoo ink, on her neck and wrists. She gave Maximilian a murderous glare.

"It will fade in a few days," Maximilian said calmly.

"Do I want to know what that shrieking upstairs was about?" Ms. King asked, as she joined her children in the dining room.

"No, Mother," Julia and Maximilian replied together.

"Hmm." She sat down, glanced at Julia, her eyes taking in the writing showing beneath the hems of her robe, and then shook her head. "I certainly hope that's going to fade by Saturday. It won't do for you to be looking like a walking scroll at the Cotillion."

Julia froze, and almost dropped her glass of water. Then her face lit up.

"Really?" She looked hopefully at her mother. "Do you really mean we can go?"

"It will be a good experience for Alexandra. And the two of you."

Julia squealed, and got up from her seat to run around the table and embrace her mother. "Oh, thank you, Mother! Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Ms. King laughed gently, and squeezed her daughter. Alexandra glanced at Maximilian, and saw that he was not smiling.

"This means no more cursing each other between now and Saturday," Ms. King scolded. "You're both getting too old for this foolishness anyway."

"Yes, Mother," Julia and Maximilian responded.

Julia turned to look at Alexandra, eyes shining brightly. "Oh, Alexandra, isn't it wonderful?"

"I guess. Umm, what exactly is a Cotillion?" Alexandra asked.

"It's a formal dance," Maximilian informed her. "All of Roanoke high society will be there. Including families who know who we are, Julia."

"Oh, fie! All you ever talk about is how horrible it will be if anyone finds out who our father is!" Julia turned her nose up disdainfully at her brother. "Well, Mother doesn't think it will be so bad, do you, Mother?"

"I think you all need to face the reaction of your peers sooner or later," Ms. King replied, with a very mild, almost impassive, expression.

"I don't know how to dance," Alexandra mumbled uneasily.

"Maximilian and I can teach you." Julia was beaming with excitement, as the house-elves brought dinner to the table. "Oh, Mother, we have to go shopping! I need new robes —"

"The hundred or so you have in your closet aren't enough?" Maximilian asked dryly.

"— and we need to get formal robes for Alexandra too!" Julia continued, ignoring her brother.

"Those are kind of like... dresses, aren't they?" Alexandra asked, a frown creasing her brow.

"We'll go to New Roanoke tomorrow," Ms. King promised.

"I don't wear dresses," Alexandra said.

"Oh, don't be silly," Julia replied. "This is a Cotillion, you have to dress properly! And we'll have Olina do your hair –"

"What do you mean, do my hair?" Alexandra was becoming more alarmed by the second.

"– and I'll help make up your face, and we can choose some nice perfume and earrings while we're in New Roanoke –"

"I am not wearing a dress, or makeup, or perfume or earrings!" Alexandra protested.

"Did you bring your JROC uniform?" Maximilian asked casually, lifting a fork to his mouth. "Witches from BMI wear their dress uniforms."

Alexandra shook her head.

"Then I guess you're going to wear a dress," he said smugly.

"Formal robes!" Julia corrected him, with a glower. "Don't worry, Alexandra, you're going to look beautiful. Oh, I can't wait!"

Alexandra gave Maximilian a dirty look. He'd gone from sullen and taciturn to bemused. He winked at her. She didn't wink back.

She didn't want to argue with Julia, or seem ungrateful, in front of Ms. King, but as the three teenagers walked back upstairs for the evening, she tried to broach the subject again.

"Julia, the Cotillion sounds... fun, I guess, but I'm not really into all that... girly stuff."

Julia, on the step above her, turned around and arched her eyebrows.

"What do you mean? You are a girl, aren't you?"

"Well, yes." She tried to ignore Maximilian's snickering, behind her. "But I don't wear dresses and makeup, or earrings. That's for –"

“Girls?” Julia asked archly.

Alexandra exhaled slowly, frowning.

“Is there something wrong with being a girl, Alexandra?”

“Of course not!” she replied indignantly.

“Oh, I know you're something of a tomboy.” Julia sighed, and patted her shoulder. Alexandra could see blue letters crawling up the other girl's neck. Something ending with '-erbrain.' “But you're thirteen, now! The Cotillion will be your first appearance in wizarding society as a witch.”

“And yours,” Maximilian commented.

“Yes, and that's why it's important for both of us to look gorgeous!” Julia smiled brightly at her siblings, and then continued up the stairs.

“I'm not sure I want to look gorgeous,” Alexandra replied, following her. “Even if I could.”

“Oh, you can, and you will! You're going to be dressed up beautifully, like a girl.” And as Alexandra opened her mouth, Julia spun about, held up a hand, and said firmly, “Now, don't argue with me, Alexandra, because you will lose. I won't hear another word.” For a moment, she sounded very much like her mother. Then she leaned forward and put her arms around the younger girl. “But trust me, you're going to love it!” With that, she kissed her sister on the cheek, and then bounded off to her room, humming under her breath.

Alexandra turned, to catch her brother looking much too amused.

She glared at him. “What's so funny?” she demanded.

“My two stubborn, wicked sisters,” he replied.

“You're enjoying this, aren't you?”

“You have no idea.”

She shook her head. “Just wait until after the Cotillion,” she said. “You'll see some wickedness then.”

His eyes narrowed, but he still looked amused.

“You don't really seem thrilled about this Cotillion either. I heard you like dancing.”

Maximilian smiled, but some of the amusement faded. “Cotillions introduce you to wizarding society. It's where eligible pureblood witches and wizards meet each other. It used to be where marriages were arranged, and sometimes it still is. You aren't just dancing with other kids, you're dancing with potential future husbands.”

Alexandra's forehead wrinkled, and her mouth twisted into a grimace.

“That's the way things are still done among Old Colonial families, Alex.”

“I'm not even a pureblood,” she pointed out.

“That's not as important as it used to be. But your parentage is.” He looked at her seriously. “Julia has no idea. She's gone to an all-girls school for the last four years. She's eager to dive into wizarding society, and wizarding society is going to throw her right back.”

“Haven't you told her this before?”

Maximilian nodded. “Of course I have. But she's like you – she doesn't listen.”

“You know, maybe you should stop worrying about both of us. We're both tougher than you think we are. Julia's not a wimp. And why are you assuming that no one will want to date her because she's Abraham Thorn's daughter? You keep saying that, but I have friends at Charmbridge, even though I'm his daughter, and girls don't seem to have stopped flirting with you just because you're his son. I mean, even Constance and Forbearance have a crush on you!”

Maximilian folded his arms across his chest, until she finished, then said, "Constance and Forbearance are Ozarkers."

"Yeah, so?"

"So, let's suppose I actually did begin dating one of them. Pretending, for a moment, that they aren't much too young."

"Don't even think about dating my friends."

He rolled his eyes. "The point is," he went on, "it's one thing for your little friends to have a crush. Believe me – if the Pritchards' ma and pa found out that one of their daughters was dating the son of Abraham Thorn, they'd yank those girls back to the Ozarks so fast their bonnets would spin. And it would be like that with pretty much any traditional wizarding family."

Alexandra thought about Beatrice, and her very traditional wizarding family. "You don't know that."

He sighed. "Yes, Alexandra, I do."

She shook her head. "Fine. So you and Julia can date someone who doesn't care about this stupid wizard society stuff, someone who's not a pureblood. Or isn't a Mudblood good enough for you and your sister?"

He stared at her. "That's not fair, Alex," he said quietly. "You know I don't think that way."

She looked down, scuffing the toe of her boot against the floor. "No, you just assume everyone else does, and go along with it." She looked up at him. "You know what? I don't have a problem being a 'Mudblood.' And I don't think Julia has a problem being Abraham Thorn's daughter. What are you so afraid of, Max?"

He shook his head. "You just don't understand."

"Yeah, I guess not. Good night, Max."

When she entered her room, she found Charlie already half-asleep, with only a few crumbs left around the bottom of the birdcage. Deezie had been stuffing the bird with seeds and bread crusts and bits of crab and fish.

“You're getting spoiled,” she said to the raven, as she moved to close the window, since Charlie wasn't inclined to go flying at night when such a feast was readily available right here in Alexandra's room. “And you're going to get fat and lazy. I'm gonna tell Deezie to stop feeding you so much, greedy-gut.”

Charlie opened one eye, and made a rude sound, like an imitation of a human burping. Alexandra shook her head, grinning, then paused. Her grin faded, as she looked down the hill, and saw two ghostly figures walking among the trees, at the edge of the woods. She couldn't make out what they were wearing, and wasn't even sure whether they were men or women, but it was definitely a pair of human figures, and there was a luminescent glow surrounding them in the darkness.

She felt the back of her neck tingle a bit, as she watched the ghostly figures walk back and forth in front of the trees, and then, for a moment, it seemed they were looking up the hill. At her.

Alexandra had never been afraid of ghosts, and even after being told they were real, she still didn't think there was any reason to fear them. But it was still unnerving to see two spirits appear before her eyes. As she watched, they retreated back into the woods, seeming to fade into the trees themselves.

“Did you see that, Charlie?” she whispered. But the raven was already asleep. It took her a while to fall asleep herself.

Julia was bouncing with excitement the next morning, as she summoned Alexandra into her room, and then began tossing what seemed like a mountain of robes onto her bed, trying to select one to wear to town, while sorting old robes she'd outgrown into another pile. These, she held up against Alexandra, one after the other, muttering about colors and sizes and trim and cuts.

"You have a lot," Alexandra commented, eyeing the pile of rich fabric. "Why do we need to go shopping? I don't mind wearing one of your robes."

"Oh, don't be silly! These are old robes, Alexandra! But you can borrow one for our shopping trip."

Alexandra didn't think they looked old, and considering how many there were, Julia couldn't have worn any of them very often.

She cleared her throat. "This might sound like a dumb question, but... are the woods, you know, haunted?"

Julia looked up at her. "Oh, yes," she replied, matter-of-factly. "This island is the most haunted place in Roanoke. It's where the Bureau of Hauntings relocates ghosts who won't reside properly elsewhere. Why, did you see some ghosts last night? They weren't in the house, were they?" She frowned. "They're not supposed to come up here, but every now and then, when they're having another war, they'll ignore the boundaries, and then Mother has to go and talk to them..."

"War?" Alexandra repeated, in disbelief.

"The Colonials and the Indians. Sometimes the pirates join in. They make treaties, and then, every few years, one side or the other will violate them, and they go to war again. It's all rather silly, since they're already dead and they can't hurt each other, but I think it actually lets them pretend they're still alive, if that makes any sense."

It didn't, really, but Alexandra just nodded. Julia was peeling off her nightgown, and Alexandra could see more of Maximilian's handiwork on her back and arms, spelling out: "I am an empty-headed, spoiled little booger," and "Wicked little sisters ought to mind their brothers." When she turned around, Alexandra could see letters on her belly – written backwards, apparently so Julia would be able to read it in a mirror.

Maximilian had gotten her good, Alexandra had to admit.

Julia looked down at her bare stomach with a pout. "Horrible, isn't he? You will help me get even with him, after the Cotillion?"

"Of course." Alexandra was trying not to burst into laughter.

"At least he didn't Ink me anywhere where it will show when I'm dressed." Julia pulled on a soft blue robe with white and yellow trim, then tossed Alexandra a red and gold one. "This will look nice on you."

Maximilian was still looking smug at breakfast. Ms. King looked at her two children and shook her head.

"We'll ride to New Roanoke immediately after breakfast," she said, "and you'd better all be on your best behavior."

"Yes, Mother," replied Maximilian and Julia, and Alexandra mumbled her assent as well.

The Thestral was already hooked up to the carriage when they went outside. Two house-elves and Mr. Hunter were waiting. The older wizard spoke to Ms. King briefly, then helped her into the carriage, and Alexandra noticed that Maximilian did the same for Julia – and despite giving him a pouty glare, she allowed him to do so. Alexandra climbed quickly up into the carriage before Maximilian could give her a hand, and he just rolled his eyes at her.

Alexandra kept her eyes on the Thestral, as it pulled them down the hill, until they reached the woods. She looked around, wondering if ghosts were visible during the day. She didn't see any. Where did ghosts go when they weren't... haunting?

When they reached the beach, the Thestral once again spread its wings, and took off, skimming over the waves and pulling the carriage with it. Alexandra held her hand out over the side, to feel the spray as the winged horse's hooves kicked up little splashes along the surface of the water. Then she noticed, as they sped across the ocean towards the mainland, that there were sailboats out on the water.

"I know the Thestral is invisible to most people," she asked, "but won't Muggles notice a flying carriage?"

"We're under a Disillusionment Charm," Ms. King explained. "All the Muggles will see is another sailboat."

"Awesome." Alexandra grinned.

"Awesome!" Julia repeated, laughing with delight.

Nestled in a coastal inlet, it was obvious that New Roanoke was a wizarding town the moment they came ashore. If the men and women wearing robes and tall pointed hats on a sunny spring day weren't enough of a giveaway, the sailboats that were coming to moor at the docks were – because the docks were a hundred yards inland. Alexandra realized that some of the boats she'd seen weren't Muggle sailboats after all; they were steered by wizards, and they plowed through the sands of the beach as easily as they did through waves.

Although it was the Territorial capital, New Roanoke was smaller than Larkin Mills. Alexandra's first impression was of a quaint historical town. The streets were cobblestone or brick, and the buildings were mostly stone and wood and looked a hundred years old. The wizards and witches she saw walking the streets were almost all in robes, long cloaks, or doublets and waistcoats, with the exception of a few in red vests and sashes over black uniform shirts and pants, with badges on their pointed felt hats.

They passed a large, domed structure that Ms. King told her was the Territorial capital building. It was completely unlike Central Territory's headquarters building, concealed in a high-rise office in downtown Chicago. Alexandra saw several more Thestrals, with riders, descending into a courtyard. All around, besides the wizarding folk, there were magical creatures. Alexandra saw winged horses – both Granians and large chestnut horses that Julia told her were called Aethonans – and a hippogriff, chained to a post in front of a large circular stadium-sized building. There were flashing, flying, and screaming signs all around it, advertising the next race-day. They seemed to be driving the poor beast mad; Alexandra thought the hippogriff looked ready to tear open anyone who came close.

As they turned away from the town center, they began passing buildings that were slightly newer, with paved sidewalks in front, and here and there Alexandra saw Clockworks through storefront windows, or outside sweeping the sidewalks. Down a few side streets were parked automobiles, most resembling models she'd seen on old TV shows.

They passed an outdoor cafe where house-elves brought food and drinks to the tables, balancing enormous platters on their heads, and storefronts on either side of the street. Alexandra saw New Roanoke Professional Brooms, The Parris Family Clinic for Maladies and Maladjustments, a Boxley's Books store (much smaller than the one in Chicago), an ominous-looking building of black brick, standing apart from its neighbors on either side, with a sign saying only 'Sojourns' out front, and then another row of quaint shops, each one trying to attract attention with dancing, sparkling lights and shimmering mists in front of its windows, forming letters, shapes, or hypnotic patterns to draw the eye.

Ms. King reined in the Thestral in front of a white three-story building, with a lawn larger than some of the shops they'd just passed. It looked more like a mansion than a store. Julia was clutching Alexandra's arm eagerly.

"Glinda's has the finest robes in Roanoke," she said. "We could spend all day here!"

Alexandra nodded, not feeling nearly as excited at the prospect as Julia.

"I need to go to Gringotts," said Ms. King. "Maximilian, I want you to look after your sisters —"

"Mother, we don't need looking after!" Julia protested, and then fell silent at another stern look.

"— and remember what I said about being on your best behavior," Ms. King continued. "I'll be back in time for lunch."

Everyone nodded. Maximilian hopped out of the carriage, and Julia once again let him help her down, while surreptitiously sticking her tongue out at him. Alexandra jumped down again before he could offer her a hand.

As Ms. King rolled away in the carriage, Julia said, "You can wait for us outside, Max. Or go loiter somewhere." She tossed her hair and sniffed. "I know you'd rather juggle Quods than go clothes shopping with two girls."

"Normally, you'd be right," Maximilian replied. His eyes glinted with amusement as he looked at Alexandra. "But this might be entertaining."

"Fine, but behave, big brother." Julia cuffed him on the shoulder, while Alexandra wrinkled her nose and stuck her tongue out at him, and then the three of them entered the enormous store.

It was exactly as tedious as Alexandra expected it to be. There were racks of robes and dresses, cloaks and capes, gowns, and even some Muggle-style skirts, along with boots, slippers, and sandals, and witches' hats in all shapes and sizes and colors. Maximilian was the only male in the store. He followed his sisters around, disinterested but bemused, as Julia went delightedly from one display to another. There were a few other teenage witches in the store, and soon they were all casting glances at Maximilian.

The finer robes floated in alcoves, turning about and raising their sleeves as if worn by invisible, animated mannequins. But Alexandra, despite having little knowledge of and no interest in fashion, noticed one thing about the dresses being featured most prominently in the center of the store: they were appalling. They looked like cast-offs from a Hollywood B-movie: huge pink tulle ball gowns, enormous fluffy blue hoop skirts, and some plaid affairs that made her think of Muggle schoolgirl uniforms, except they came with bustles and lace bodices.

"Look, Alexandra! Isn't this lovely?" Julia proclaimed, pointing at something that looked like it was made out of cotton candy.

Alexandra was trying to think of a polite way to express revulsion and horror, when the proprietor strode up behind them.

"Is this your first time at Glinda's Good Witch Apparel?" she asked, in an artificially friendly tone, with a stiff smile that said she was not altogether sure that these two teenage girls with a boy in tow belonged here.

"Yes, ma'am," Julia replied, turning around. "My sister and I are looking for something to wear to the Cotillion. And you can ignore him. He's just my brother."

"I see," the witch said dryly, as Maximilian's mouth twitched. Then her eyes fell on Alexandra, who had the back of her hand over her mouth.

"Are you all right, young lady?" she asked.

"Yes," Alexandra replied, choking back laughter. Julia and Maximilian were both looking at her strangely now. "I was just wondering where the yellow brick road is?" she mumbled, and then had to press her hand over her mouth again.

Her half-siblings stared at her, baffled, but the proprietor raised an eyebrow.

"Are you Muggle-born?" she asked slowly.

Alexandra's laughter died quickly. She dropped her hand, and stared defiantly back at the witch.

"Yes, I am," she replied.

Maximilian no longer looked amused. He seemed about to intervene, looking angrily at the older woman, and Alexandra could feel eyes on them, from other customers in the store, but to her surprise, the proprietor's face broke out into a smile. "Have you actually read Frank Baum, or only seen the movie?" she asked.

"I read the books when I was a kid," Alexandra answered, a bit thrown by the question.

While Julia and Maximilian looked confused, the older witch put a hand on Alexandra's shoulder. "Let's see what we can find to make you look lovely for your first Cotillion, dear." She lowered her voice. "Forget those hideous things out front, those are for purebloods who'd rather spend money on spectacle than style." And as she guided Alexandra towards the stairs, with her puzzled siblings following behind, she leaned forward and whispered in her ear: "I'm Muggle-born, too."

'Glinda's' real name was Laurel Parker, and Alexandra learned that she'd started 'Glinda's Good Witch Apparel' thirty years ago, opening a small robe shop with a name chosen in a moment of wry irony. She'd been enormously successful, and apparently enjoyed the fact that few of her customers had ever caught on to the joke. She asked Alexandra where she was from, and they talked about television and comic books and the Wizard of Oz, while the seamstress took all sorts of measurements from her and Julia, with a now-thoroughly bored Maximilian waiting in the next room.

Then Ms. Parker brought her a gold robe with a braided sash, and Alexandra balked.

"I don't wear dresses," she objected. They could call it a 'formal robe' all they liked – this was a dress!

"Surely for special occasions," said Ms. Parker.

Alexandra shook her head. "Not since I was, like, six."

"Alexandra!" Julia squealed. "This is a Clytemnestra Kirk original!" She turned around and took Alexandra's hands in her own. "Oh, Alex, please just try it on!"

Alexandra looked at her sister, and thought about how much this ridiculous dance meant to her.

"If Max makes one stupid comment –"

"He won't, I swear!"

Alexandra sighed, defeated. At least none of her friends would see her in it. With the same expression she wore when going to serve detention, she went into the changing booth, took off her casual robe and boots, and slid into the gold formal robe. It was tighter and clingier than anything she'd ever worn before. It left uncomfortably large portions of her neck, shoulders, and back bare. It left her legs exposed up to her calves. When she walked out of the changing booth, Julia gasped, clapped her hands together, and jumped up and down. "Alex, it's beautiful!"

Ms. Parker beckoned her over, and began making small adjustments by waving her wand over Alexandra's shoulders and waist.

"You're going to look so darling!" Julia was cooing, as Alexandra stood there hoping that perhaps the ground would open up and swallow her between now and Saturday night.

"I think it's lovely," agreed Ms. Parker.

"Can't we get something that's more like a regular robe?" Alexandra asked. "You know, that covers my shoulders? And my ankles?"

"You talk like a Salem Traditionalist," Julia laughed. She took Alexandra's wrist. "Come on! Let's show Max!"

"No!" Alexandra protested, but Julia dragged her out of the fitting room and into the mirrored waiting area, where Alexandra could see herself from every angle. Maximilian, slouched in a chair with a bored expression, straightened up and gave her a long, appraising look. Alexandra stared back at him, daring him to say something.

Julia gave her brother a warning look, but it was unnecessary. Maximilian smiled. "You look nice."

"Nice? Max, she looks stunning!"

"I do not. It's just a dress." Alexandra shook her head.

"I'd just as soon she not look stunning," Maximilian agreed. "Or you."

“Hmph.” Julia turned her nose up. “Well, I am going to look stunning, and I'm going to dance with every boy at the Cotillion!” With her head held high, she turned on her heel and marched back into the fitting room, where Ms. Parker had brought some more robes for her to try on.

Alexandra could feel her cheeks reddening a bit, as Maximilian walked over to her, and then circled her slowly.

“Julia's just gushing because she got me into a dress,” Alexandra told him.

“Yes,” he agreed. “But you don't look half bad. In a few years, you might even turn a few heads.”

He was being blunt, rather than flattering her, and she found this almost comforting.

“I'm not in any hurry.”

“Good.”

She shook her head, and gave him a sour smile, which faded as she glanced over her shoulder, and then leaned towards him.

“This is a Clytemnestra Kirk original,” she whispered.

Maximilian nodded. “So I heard. Along with everyone else in the store.”

“Yeah.” Alexandra looked down, and ran her fingers briefly over the gold fabric of her sleeve. “I guess that means it must be pretty expensive.”

Maximilian shrugged.

“Max,” she whispered. “I don't have that kind of money! And I can't ask my mother for –”

"Forget it, Alex," he said brusquely. "It's taken care of."

She looked at him a moment, then shook her head. "No, I can't let you and your mom pay for something really expensive like this."

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course you can." And then he cut her off before she could argue. "But Mother isn't paying for it."

"What?" She frowned at him. "Are you paying for it out of your allowance? That's really nice, Max, but I already feel bad enough that you gave me a broom and all I gave you –"

"Stop it, Alex." Maximilian frowned down at her. "In case you haven't noticed, money isn't an issue for us. But I'm not paying for the robe either." He leaned forward, and whispered in her ear, "Other arrangements have been made. Anything you want for the Cotillion is all taken care of. Think of it as a belated birthday present."

Alexandra blinked, and stared at her brother silently, until they heard Julia emerging from the fitting rooms. Julia looked much nicer than her, in a violet robe with a multilayered white and blue petticoat underneath, and a bodice cut lower than Maximilian liked. Alexandra smiled and assured Julia that every boy at the Cotillion would want to dance with her, and both of them laughed at their brother's scowl. But to herself, she wondered if expensive clothes were all Julia had come to expect from their father.

They still had to buy shoes, and Alexandra was grateful that high heels were not fashionable among witches – she'd been afraid Julia might want her to wear those, too. Ms. Parker found a pair of surprisingly comfortable gold slippers that matched Alexandra's robe, and Julia bought a new set of slippers as well, ignoring Maximilian's comments about the two dozen pairs she already owned.

Alexandra thanked Ms. Parker sincerely as they left Glinda's Good Witch Apparel, and the woman smiled and winked at her. Ms. King was waiting outside, sitting in her carriage behind the Thestral, and Julia happily described everything they'd bought.

There was a Goody Pruett's on the corner, so Ms. King took them there for ice cream. Goody Pruett's Witch-Made Pies, Cakes, and Other Confections was the first wizarding establishment Alexandra had ever visited, and the one in New Roanoke looked much like the one in Chicago, with the manager smiling at them from her picture frame on the wall, and a variety of pies, cakes, and candies tempting customers from their display cases. Alexandra and the Kings each settled for a scoop of Wyland West's 99-Flavored Ice Cream, and were enjoying their treat when an old wizard in deep blue robes approached their table. He had dark brown skin, a long white beard, and a bald head; he was holding a pointed wizard's cap in his hands, one so tall that it would have scraped against the ceiling if he hadn't taken it off.

"Thalia," he announced seriously. "I thought I saw you at Gringotts."

"You did," Ms. King replied peaceably.

"Out with your children, I see." The wizard nodded gravely to Maximilian and Julia, who nodded back politely. The old man then turned to look at Alexandra.

"This is Julia's friend Alexandra," said Ms. King. "Alexandra, this is Elymas Rolfe. A very important man in Roanoke. He was on the Wizards' Congress for many years."

Alexandra knew there must be a reason Ms. King was telling her that. Elymas Rolfe would have known her father, then, when he was a Congressman. Were they friends, or enemies?

"You would be Alexandra Thorn, then," Mr. Rolfe said quietly.

Julia and Maximilian both became very still, and Alexandra couldn't read Ms. King's expression.

"I would be Alexandra Quick," she replied, looking the elderly wizard in the eye, even though he was obviously someone important and powerful. He had a presence, too, that made her think he probably wasn't used to people staring him down in ice cream shops, especially not thirteen-year-old girls. But he didn't look angry or upset

at her correction. Neither did he smile. He seemed to be scrutinizing her for several seconds, and then he nodded and turned back to Ms. King.

"I noticed the young ladies shopping at Glinda's with their brother. Are you planning to attend the Cotillion?"

"We did receive an invitation," Ms. King replied evenly.

"I hope you know what sort of attention you are inviting, then." Mr. Rolfe's worried expression struck Alexandra as not entirely sincere.

"Thank you for your concern, Elymas." Ms. King smiled coolly. "And for paying such close attention to three children shopping for clothes, when I'm sure there are much more important matters with which you could be concerning yourself."

Elymas Rolfe blinked slowly at Ms. King, and then nodded his head slightly. "It's always lovely to see you, Thalia. And a pleasure to meet your children... and Miss Quick." He gave an even briefer nod to the teens, who all nodded back curtly. "Be well."

"And you too, Elymas."

The wizard turned and strode out of Goody Pruett's, without buying anything. Ms. King resumed eating her ice cream cone.

"I know, I shouldn't have been rude to him," Alexandra mumbled, anticipating a lecture from Maximilian, or worse, his mother. But Ms. King merely raised an eyebrow.

"You're right, you shouldn't have been," she said. "But he was being presumptuous also."

"Was he a friend of our father?" Alexandra asked.

Ms. King paused, and then shook her head. "No."

"An enemy, then?" Maximilian asked.

"No." Ms. King shook her head again. "Mr. Rolfe is a politician. Like your father."

"He was warning us," Maximilian muttered.

"Yes." Ms. King rose from the table, and the children followed suit. "And we should consider his warning seriously."

"Mother!" Julia protested immediately. "You're not saying we can't go to the Cotillion, are you?"

Ms. King didn't answer immediately, and Julia wrung her hands anxiously until they had all climbed into the Thestral-drawn carriage again and set off down the street.

"Mother," Julia pleaded again, at last, and her mother shook her head.

"If you still want to go," Ms. King said, "then go we shall. But you must realize that it's been many years since your father disappeared, and fear of speaking his name is fading. If Elymas Rolfe knew immediately who Alexandra is, then it's likely that his other children will also be named soon enough, perhaps even appear in the society pages of the Roanoke Magic Gazette." For a moment, the older witch's expression was distant, and sad. "Not everyone is unkind, but few will break ranks with those who consider your father a traitor and a Dark wizard." She focused her gaze on her daughter again, and her expression became soft. "You thought Fred and Betty refusing to play with you any more was hurtful. Do you really want to risk facing the censure of Roanoke society?"

Julia looked torn and uncertain for a moment, and Maximilian turned around in the carriage, to regard his sister quietly, all mocking and banter forgotten. Then she held her head up.

"I won't be made scared by rumor-mongers and gossips." She looked at Alexandra, and sighed. "But it's not fair for Alexandra to face that. She didn't ask to be made to go to a dance where she might be cut and shunned."

"Don't worry about me," Alexandra insisted. "I'm used to being cut and shunned."

Maximilian almost smiled, and Alexandra gave him a small smile in return, and then patted the wrapped bundle in her lap. "It's not like I'll ever wear this again, so we might as well go."

Julia beamed, and wrapped her arms around her younger sister. "We are going to have fun, Alexandra!"

Alexandra wasn't so sure, but she nodded, and exchanged a look with Maximilian. He just sighed, and nodded to her, with a resigned expression.

That night, Alexandra once more saw ghosts down in the forest, as she opened her window to let Charlie in. She'd told Deezie not to feed the raven so much, so Charlie had eventually gone flying out over the island. As Alexandra stroked the bird's glossy black feathers, she watched little flashes of light twinkle in the darkness, like stars, and saw a troop of glowing ghostly figures bearing spears and bows come charging out of the trees, briefly survey the meadowed hillside leading up to Croatoa, and then fade back into the woods.

The Cotillion

"This is not fun," Alexandra complained, as Maximilian let go of her with an annoyed look.

"If you'd just relax a little," suggested Julia.

"And do as I say," Maximilian told her.

"I am relaxing and doing as you say!" Alexandra grumbled.

They were trying to teach her to dance. Alexandra had never been to a dance in her life. The only dancing she had seen was on TV, and Muggle pop star performances did not resemble the formal patterns of a cotillion at all.

"Do you want to look completely hopeless on the ballroom floor?" Maximilian asked her.

"You keep saying that like anyone is actually going to dance with me. How many seventh graders attend a Cotillion, anyway?"

"Not many," Maximilian admitted. "But there will be a few kids your age. And some boys who aren't so old I'll have to hex them if they come near you."

"If you don't stop acting like you're my father, I'll dance with someone really old, like eighteen, just to annoy you."

"That's the spirit!" Julia laughed, but Alexandra's crack about acting like her father caused a shadow to pass over Maximilian's face.

She sighed. "I really think I'm just going to watch you two dance. I don't mind, really."

"You'll do no such thing!" Julia insisted. She waved her wand, and music once more flowed out of an old device that looked like a phonograph, except that nothing was touching the platter that spun on it.

"You're too tall," Alexandra complained again, stumbling to match her brother's steps.

"Keep complaining, and I'll have you dance with the house-elves instead." He took her hand, and made her repeat another chasse with him, while Julia danced with a shadow-partner next to them.

By Saturday, Maximilian was still calling her 'hopeless,' but Julia assured her that she was doing fine. "And Max isn't such a wonderful dancer himself," she added. "They only have a few weeks of mandatory dance instruction at BMI, as part of their Etiquette & Traditions class."

Saturday afternoon began the final trial Alexandra had to endure before the Cotillion, as Julia summoned Deezie and Olina to her room, along with Alexandra, and insisted that they were both going to be 'made up' for the evening.

"I told you —" Alexandra protested, but Julia grabbed her shoulders and practically shoved her into a seat in front of her enormous, three-way vanity table. Alexandra's reflections in the mirrors obligingly turned around and tilted their necks this way and that, until Alexandra could see the back of her own head.

"Miss's hair is a bit short," Olina squeaked, hopping up onto a stool behind her and taking hold of Alexandra's hair, where it hung down not quite to the nape of her neck. "But we can make it very pretty." The elf's spindly fingers reached around Alexandra's forehead to begin parting her bangs. "A few charms —"

"You don't need to charm my hair!" Alexandra objected.

"We'll add a little bit of color to your cheeks and lips," Julia said, as next to her, Deezie nodded. "And a Lash-Lengthening Charm. You have such lovely green eyes, we want to accentuate them —"

"No, no makeup!" Alexandra protested. But they spent the rest of the afternoon under the attentions of the two house-elves, while Alexandra continued to argue about what she would and would not

submit to, and Julia demonstrated a remarkable ability to overrule her every objection.

Alexandra watched nervously as Olina took scissors to her hair and began magically rearranging it, making it stand up on her head, lie down in layers, or sweep forward while she snipped. Julia sat in front of her, using potions and her wand to do things to her face.

By the time they were done, Alexandra was beginning to feel like one of Julia's dolls. She changed into the gold Clytemnestra Kirk robe, and then Julia finally let her turn around to look at herself in the mirror.

She gasped in shock.

She had feared she'd look like Darla Dearborn, but Julia and the elves had made her over into a more glamorous version of herself. They hadn't used much makeup at all – her lips were redder, her cheeks a little rosier, and her pale complexion had been smoothed over – but Alexandra had never worn any kind of makeup before. Every blemish on her skin had vanished. Her green eyes looked much brighter than usual; thanks to some charm cast by Julia, they almost sparkled. Her eyebrows were thinner and darker. Her black hair now looked silky, framing her face like a model's.

“You're beautiful, Alex!” Julia enthused, kissing her cheek lightly.

“No, you're beautiful. I'm just –” Her voice trailed off. She couldn't deny that the transformation was startling. She stared at the mirror, and a young woman stared back at her. In the matching mirrors to either side, the young woman smiled and winked and preened and tilted her head coyly, in a way Alexandra never could. “This is just... charms. Magic can make anyone look pretty.”

“You do like it, don't you?” Julia looked at her anxiously, until Alexandra smiled.

“Yes,” she said. “Thank you. It's... amazing.” She smiled at Olina, too. “Thank you, Olina. My hair looks great. Everything looks great.”

I really look like a girl, she thought. She wasn't sure exactly what she thought about that – or why her heart was also fluttering and she couldn't take her eyes away from the strangely pretty girl in the mirror, whose reflection smiled, pouted, laughed, and batted her lashes, posing and spinning around to show herself off from all angles, while Alexandra stood silent and motionless.

“Let's show Max,” Julia suggested, and Alexandra's stomach clenched into a knot. She shook her head. She didn't want her brother to see her like this. She wasn't sure she was ready for anyone to see her like this. But once again, Julia dragged her unwillingly out of her room, and called Maximilian, who emerged from his own room wearing his dress uniform. His wand and a sword both hung from a black sash, and a dark blue cape was draped over his shoulders. All the ribbons he'd been awarded at Blacksburg were pinned to his broad chest, just above the black crow, outlined in silver, that occasionally turned its head right or left, and flapped its wings or made grasping movements with its talons. The creases on his sleeves and trouser legs were razor-sharp.

Maximilian regarded his sisters silently, as Julia squealed and ran over to him to wrap her arms around his waist. “Oh, don't we have a handsome brother, Alexandra?” she exclaimed. Maximilian smiled slightly, and put an arm around Julia, still looking at his youngest sister.

“Yeah. You look nice,” Alexandra admitted grudgingly.

He did. Although his being her brother spared her from thinking anything more than that, she was uncomfortably aware of the fact that suddenly she could see exactly what so many other girls apparently did. She turned a little redder, under his scrutiny.

“Be nice, and if you say one evil thing tonight, Maximilian King...” Julia was whispering in his ear, but Maximilian just shook his head.

“You both look fine,” he said. He peeled Julia away from him, and held her arm over her head, spinning her around in a little pirouette, before pressing the back of her hand to his lips. “No witches at the Cotillion will look finer.”

"Honey-tongued blaggard!" Julia replied, but she blushed with pleasure.

Maximilian looked down at Alexandra, and nodded. "You definitely don't look like a Muggle tomboy anymore," he said softly.

"Wait until tomorrow," Alexandra retorted, "when I go back to normal."

"Good." Maximilian smiled, as Julia sighed dramatically.

"Are we ready to go, children?" Ms. King called from downstairs.

"Oh. There's one thing I forgot," Alexandra said, and she went back into her bedroom.

At some point, she had decided there was one piece of jewelry she would wear, though she wasn't sure when she'd made the decision, or how. But she opened the drawer where she'd been keeping her personal belongings – her Muggle money, her cell phone, her house key, Diana Grimm's card – and took out the locket her father had given her. Charlie cawed as usual upon spying the golden locket, but Alexandra undid the chain's clasp, and refastened it behind her head, then let the chain settle around her neck. The locket lay against her collarbone, matching the gold of her robe. She looked in the mirror, and then turned to Charlie.

"Do I look all right, Charlie?" she asked.

She'd meant it as a rhetorical question, but Charlie answered: "Pretty bird."

Alexandra laughed, and leaned forward to kiss the top of Charlie's feathered head. "Stay out of trouble, pretty bird."

"Troublesome," Charlie squawked, and then took off through the open window.

The sun was going down as they crossed the sound, and this time, they rode in a larger and fancier carriage, pulled by two Granians

instead of a Thestral. Ms. King also cast Windshield and Waterproofing Charms, so that the sea breeze and the ocean spray would not muss anyone's hair or clothes.

A thousand lanterns, candles, and magical lights danced on the streets of New Roanoke as their winged horses brought them past the beach, and hooves and wheels touched down on the wizarding town's cobbled streets. They could see other carriages converging on the same place they were headed towards, some pulled by winged horses and some pulled by ordinary horses, and one by what looked like a gigantic black winged goat. Alexandra saw a few cars as well, traveling along a narrow street parallel to the main avenue leading to a pillared mansion even larger than Croatoa.

"This is the Governor's mansion," Ms. King announced, as Alexandra stared at the huge building with its marble steps and columns. It was even grander than the Territorial Headquarters building they'd seen the other day.

"Will the Governor-General be there?" Alexandra asked suddenly.

Ms. King pursed her lips, and shook her head. "It's not likely. This is a relatively small event; the Governor-General of the Confederation has better things to do than attend local Cotillions."

"Even ones hosted by his friend, the Governor of his home Territory?" Maximilian muttered.

Alexandra glanced at Maximilian, wondering if he had ever met Governor-General Hucksteen.

Liveried house-elves greeted each arrival, taking the reins of their horses and leading the carriages around the mansion. The Kings descended regally from their carriage, and Alexandra held her head up and tried to imitate Julia's confident walk.

Thalia King looked glorious, in brocaded purple and gold robes that could have been worn by an empress, and Alexandra couldn't help wondering why such an attractive, powerful, and wealthy witch had

never remarried. Maximilian and Julia were both admiring their mother, too. Ms. King smiled at the teenagers. "Shall we enter?"

On either side of the double-doored entrance to the Governor's mansion, Alexandra saw a pair of cloaked wizards dressed in black, except for their red vests. At first glance, they appeared to be standing there motionlessly, but as the Kings came closer, she realized the wizards were doing something with their wands, held in gloved hands and mostly concealed by their cloaks.

"Aurors," Maximilian muttered. "They aren't usually so worried about security at Cotillions, are they, Mother?"

"No," Ms. King murmured.

The Aurors seemed to give the Kings, and Alexandra, particular scrutiny as they passed through the doors. Alexandra stared back at one of the men. Their eyes met for a moment, and she thought she saw something flicker there – it might have been apprehension, or it might have been annoyance at being stared down by a teenage girl.

They walked on a red carpet, between marble columns, into an enormous rotunda. Witches and wizards were mingling everywhere; huddled in alcoves or watching from balconies on the two floors above them, or crossing the center of the floor, where dancing had not yet started, to greet friends and acquaintances.

Those just arriving waited in line to be announced, and Alexandra heard a wizard calling the name of each attendee, with a magically amplified voice that boomed throughout the hall.

"JOHN WILLIAM BLAND AND MARJORIE ELIZABETH BLAND!" bellowed the announcer. The Blands both looked very old. Mr. Bland wore a black and green doublet and dark green velvet trousers, beneath a black overcoat, and Mrs. Bland wore a simple dark red and brown Puritan-style dress and bonnet, rather than the fancy robes most of the witches were wearing.

"Remember, Julia, you're worth more than any boy here," Maximilian said quietly. He looked at Alexandra. "You too."

“Stop fretting!” Julia whispered back to him.

Maximilian squeezed Julia's hand, as the wizard-announcer, wearing something like an old-fashioned courtier's uniform, with puffy sleeves and pants, and ruffles around his neck, spoke into his wand again.

“GLINDA CLOTHO PARKER AND HENRY AQUARIUS BOLLING!”

Ahead of them, Alexandra recognized the proprietor of Glinda's Good Witch Apparel, holding onto the arm of a handsome wizard (who looked quite a bit younger than her) with his long hair tied in a ponytail, wearing a beautiful, colorful robe that complemented hers. She looked over her shoulder at Alexandra, and winked, as she and her escort proceeded into the hall.

“THALIA AGATHA KING!” called the announcer, as Ms. King stepped forward, and she nodded slightly as a number of people turned their gazes in her direction.

Her children followed her, and Alexandra hung back slightly, as the wizard looked down at his guest list, and read: “MAXIMILIAN ALEXANDER KING AND JULIA MAJESTA KING!”

Julia beamed and waved, and some of the boys in the hall smiled. Alexandra saw a number of teenage girls, and unsurprisingly, many had noticed Maximilian.

She followed her brother and sister, and the announcer called out: “ALEXANDRA OCTAVIA THORN...” He made a startled noise as his voice trailed off and he looked up from his scroll.

The Kings froze, then turned around slowly. Ms. King's eyes widened for a second, and flashed angrily, before she composed herself and looked serene and unruffled once more.

The announcer stared at Alexandra for a moment, and then cleared his throat. “ARAMINTA MELIORA VANBRUGH!” he said hastily.

The twenty-something witch behind her, an attractive brunette wearing one of the Oz-like gowns Ms. Parker had secretly disparaged, looked both horrified and crestfallen, as what she had obviously been intending to be a grand entrance went almost completely unnoticed, because all eyes were focused on the thirteen-year-old in front of her.

Alexandra walked forward, and Ms. King reached out and took her hand.

"Hold your head up," the older woman whispered kindly. "You have nothing to be ashamed of."

"I know," Alexandra whispered back. But she was looking at Julia and Maximilian, wondering what they were thinking. Julia looked worried, uncertain. Maximilian's face was expressionless, until he caught her eye, and with a resigned smile, he nodded, and offered Julia his arm.

The four of them walked into the vast round hall. Hushed voices seemed to be whispering all around them. She saw more of those cloaked Aurors standing in balconies and alcoves, watching them. Conversation gradually went back to normal, but Alexandra could feel the eyes of Roanoke's most prominent wizard families all scrutinizing them, for the rest of the evening.

Alexandra was much more interested in people-watching than in dancing, so it didn't really bother her that, exactly as she expected, no boys had the nerve to approach her. But it was painful to watch Julia standing on the perimeter by herself while other couples danced.

The musicians with their magical, floating instruments went from slow waltzes to fast tangos. Julia didn't go the entire evening without being asked to dance. Now and then one of the braver boys would approach her, and Julia didn't turn any of them down. Alexandra studied the boys who danced with her sister, and was able to divide them into three categories. The first were those she deduced were lower in the wizarding social hierarchy, by their plainer robes and the fact that, like Alexandra, they were obviously unfamiliar with the protocols of wizard cotillions. She wondered if Julia shared her brother's conflicted, contradictory attitudes about Muggle-borns and half-bloods.

The second group were boys clearly dancing with Abraham Thorn's daughter on a dare. They huddled with their friends, whispering amongst themselves, before someone would brave crossing the floor to ask the pretty girl in the indigo robes to dance. Julia was polite, but her face was stiff – she realized what was going on, too. Alexandra saw some of these daredevils heading in her direction, but she deterred them with hostile glowers that made even older boys back away. She didn't want anyone dancing with her on a dare.

The third group was made up of uniformed Stormcrows, and Alexandra had a pretty good idea of who had put them up to asking Julia to dance. When a boy in a BMI uniform with the unstriped sleeves of a 'new wand' approached Alexandra, looking no older than twelve, and utterly terrified, she muttered, “Oh, hell no!” and disappeared into the back of the hall. She slipped between several adults, who parted for her and fell silent as she passed, until she was almost out of earshot. Upstairs, she was able to watch from a balcony, without being bothered by any more of her brother's unfortunate draftees.

Maximilian, for his part, socialized enough to avoid being a wallflower like Alexandra. He danced with a few female Stormcrows, who were dressed in uniforms much like the ones the boys wore, and occasionally he asked some girls who were flirting with him, but Alexandra could see many more girls pointedly turning their backs whenever he walked past. He took no apparent notice of them.

“I think we'll be leaving soon,” said Ms. King behind her, as Alexandra stood on a second floor balcony and looked down at Julia and Maximilian dancing a reel together.

Alexandra turned around to look at the King matriarch. She had stepped out onto the dance floor a couple of times, once with a wizard that had been at the Governor's side earlier, but mostly Ms. King had been out of sight, perhaps not wanting to draw even more attention to her children.

“I guess this wasn't as much fun as Julia was hoping,” Alexandra said.

Ms. King smiled at her, a little sadly. "The Governor was going to launch an inquiry – a formal inquiry, mind you – to find out how your birth name happened to get onto the guest list, rather than the name I sent them. I told him not to bother. I hope you don't mind, but I really don't think it matters just who among your father's many enemies decided to make sure his children were singled out publicly. I am sorry you were made the target, Alexandra."

Alexandra shook her head. "I'm not ashamed. I'm sorry I was used to hurt Julia and Max, though."

"It's not your fault. If it hadn't been your name on the guest list, it would have been something else."

"Like all these Aurors staring at us and following us around? Maybe the Governor should launch a formal inquiry about how that happened? I'm sure that totally surprised him, too."

Directly across the ballroom, on a balcony on the same level opposite the one where Alexandra and Ms. King stood, a cloaked Auror was standing in the shadows, watching them. Alexandra thought he resembled a bat. She smiled at him and waved. The Auror didn't wave back.

"Tsk." Ms. King put a hand on Alexandra's, and gently pulled her arm down. "You're quite right, my dear." She spoke softly. "But please, don't become bitter and angry, not at such a young age. These aren't the greatest indignities you'll ever face, as your father's daughter, and you can allow the unfairness to gnaw at you and consume you, or learn to handle it with grace."

Alexandra was silent, as Ms. King looked down at her children on the ballroom floor below and smiled wistfully.

"You knew something like this would happen, didn't you?" Alexandra asked quietly.

The other witch turned to look at her, slowly, and then sighed. "It was almost inevitable. I've sheltered them both their entire lives, but that couldn't last forever. Julia was so insistent..." She sighed again.

"She's so brave. Both of them are. But I knew this would be a painful lesson."

Alexandra was quiet a little longer, and then she asked, "Are you ever angry at him?"

Ms. King didn't seem upset, or even surprised, by the question. She took her time before answering it, though.

"I won't say there wasn't a time when handling things with grace wasn't difficult," she replied at last. "But I had children to take care of, and anger didn't do them any good."

Alexandra nodded. She looked over the side of the balcony railing again. "Well, Julia is getting to dance some. She must be enjoying it a little." She hoped that was true, anyway.

Ms. King looked at her a moment, before commenting, "That would make one of you, then."

Alexandra shifted uncomfortably. "I've never danced before, and none of these boys really want to dance with me, and it's not like I'm going to see any of them again anyway..."

"All the more reason for you to enjoy yourself, my dear. Maximilian probably told you that Cotillions are all about finding a husband. Foolish boy. Cotillions are for socializing, and having a good time. You can dance just for the fun of it, you know."

Alexandra shrugged, looking down at her feet.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you're afraid a boy might actually ask you to dance," Ms. King chided.

Alexandra looked up at her sharply. She saw the bait, but took it anyway. "I'm not afraid!"

"Then don't let Julia and Maximilian believe that they dragged you along unwillingly and that you had a miserable time," Ms. King replied smoothly.

Alexandra frowned at that, and nodded reluctantly. "All right."

Ms. King smiled as the girl headed slowly for the stairs. Then Alexandra turned, and said, "I really do appreciate everything, Ms. King. You've been really nice, and I wanted to meet Julia so much, and now that I have, I feel like... like..." Her voice trailed off.

She couldn't complete the thought, but Ms. King spoke gently. "Like you have a sister?"

Alexandra nodded.

Ms. King walked over to her, and wrapped the girl in a soft embrace. "You will always be welcome here, Alexandra." She kissed her forehead. "Now, go dance!"

"Yes, ma'am," Alexandra mumbled, and she proceeded downstairs.

Having finally decided to dance, though, she needed to find someone willing to dance with her. She stood there, as Julia had, and waited through two entire movements, but apparently none of the boys who'd been looking to win a bet earlier were still interested.

She didn't see any women anywhere asking the men to dance. The idea of standing around looking lonely until someone took pity on her, or until some boy issued a dare, began to fill her with anger. She knew perfectly well what girls who really wanted to be asked to dance did – they flirted. They giggled, batted their lashes, and leaned forward just so, listening breathlessly to some boy, as if whatever he was saying was just the most fascinating thing in the world. Alexandra had seen it constantly back at Charmbridge – mostly around Maximilian. She saw it here at the Cotillion, too.

The heck with that, she thought, and she marched towards a knot of boys who looked like seventh and eighth graders, all of them leaning against a wall or slouching uncertainly, eyeing girls and working up the nerve to ask one of them to dance.

She made an instant decision and homed in on one of them almost before they realized she was approaching. He was about her height, ginger hair combed into a slick-back hair style, and he wasn't unpleasant-looking, but mostly she picked him because he looked less gangly and sullen than the rest. His robes were green and white, so she thought he looked a bit like a tall leprechaun, but at least he didn't bolt when she walked up to him.

"Want to dance?" she asked.

He stared at her. The other four boys with him stared as well.

"Okay," he replied, after a beat. He hesitated a moment, then took her hand and led her out onto the floor.

It was at least one of the dances she'd practiced with Maximilian. Her initial assessment had been that this boy wasn't an Old Colonial, but he turned out to be skilled enough. At least he managed not to step on her feet, and she didn't step on his.

They finished the quadrille, and to her surprise, he asked if he could have the next dance as well, a tango. She nodded, though she hadn't practiced tangos at all. What followed was considerably more clumsy, as they tried to follow along with the older dancers, and found themselves stumbling and trying to maintain proper contact without groping each other. She was relieved, and a bit flushed, when that dance finished.

"Thanks," she said, and started to walk away.

"What, did you lose a bet or something?" the boy asked behind her.

He sounded indignant and a little hurt. She turned around, surprised.

"No. I just thought –" She stopped, and realized that she hadn't even asked his name. "Sorry," she said. "This is my first Cotillion."

"Obviously," he replied.

"My name's Alexandra." She held out her hand.

“Payton,” he replied, shaking her hand. “Payton Smith.”

“Thanks for dancing with me, Payton.”

“No problem. You seem pretty nice, for a Dark wizard's daughter.”

She opened her mouth, not sure whether to be offended or amused. “What were you expecting?” she demanded.

“I don't know. Not for you to ask a Mudblood to dance, though. So this wasn't on a dare?”

She stared at him. “Of course not! You're Muggle-born? Or half-blood?”

“Important to know just how much Muggle blood I have?” His tone was sarcastic.

“No!” she protested, completely taken aback. “I thought you were a pureblood! I mean, you danced pretty well –”

“Wizards didn't invent dancing, you know,” he said dryly.

“I know that!” She flushed, feeling as if this conversation was getting all turned around. “I'm not pureblood either!”

“Really? I thought Charmbridge was for purebloods only.” Payton's tone softened a little.

“That's not true at all!” she stammered. How did he know she was a Charmbridge student? Obviously, the boys had been talking about her – like everyone else at the Cotillion. “One of my best friends is Muggle-born. I'm practically Muggle-born myself.”

“Is everything all right, Alexandra?”

She turned around, to find Maximilian giving Payton a hard stare. The younger boy stood his ground, but couldn't help looking a bit intimidated.

"Everything's fine, Max." She almost added, "Go away," but bit her tongue.

His gaze lingered on Payton, then he nodded. "I've got to find Julia. I think she's tired of dancing. We'll probably be leaving soon."

"All right."

Maximilian kept his eyes fixed on Payton a moment longer, then turned and walked away, his cape billowing behind him.

"I guess he doesn't like Mudbloods talking to his sister," Payton commented.

"He doesn't like any boys talking to his sister," Alexandra retorted. "And I told you, I'm a 'Mudblood' too." She turned back to look at the other boy. "You're being kind of a jerk, you know."

Payton's smug expression faltered.

"Sorry," he said. "Most kids from rich wizarding families act like us day school students don't belong here."

"Well, you shouldn't act like you know anything about me just because of my father."

"Okay." He nodded, a little abashed. "Maybe I'll see you around."

"Maybe." She didn't know when she'd be back in Roanoke again, or whether it was likely she'd ever attend another Cotillion, but she was flustered by now, so she slunk away to watch the crowd from the shadows.

Thus, she was surprised when a few minutes later, someone else approached her. She knew she wasn't exactly invisible – other adults glanced at her now and then, and there always seemed to be an Auror within sight – but no one seemed inclined to bother her.

The man who did was tall and narrow-shouldered, with cold blue eyes and long white-blond hair. He was much older than her, and while not completely unattractive, his teeth were a little too crooked and his nose a little too large for him to be called handsome. He was wearing crimson and blue robes, with several gold chains looped around his neck.

"It's a shame for such a lovely young witch to be hovering by the wall like a ghost," he said, with a small bow and a flourish of his long robe's sleeves. "Would you give me the honor of a dance?"

Alexandra was a little amused by the wizard's formality, but she wrinkled her nose and replied, "I think you're a little old for me. No offense."

"None taken." The man smiled. "And you exercise sound judgment, and are unafraid of being both discriminating and direct, for which I'm very glad. But I would very much like to dance with my daughter."

Alexandra blinked. She straightened up, and took a step backwards, away from the stranger. "Okay, you're crazy. And you're not my father. Go away or I'll –"

"I'm so pleased you're finally wearing the locket," he said softly, stepping closer to her and lowering his voice. "You haven't worn it since the night of your thirteenth birthday. Do you remember what I told you then?"

Her eyes widened. She stared at the strange wizard. "How –?"

"I told you that you would have a gift for your birthday, and that we would have the conversation you want to have, when we can speak more freely," he murmured, now almost looming over her.

"How can you look like someone else?" she whispered. Her eyes darted right and left. "Are you crazy? There are Aurors all over the place!"

He laughed. "Do you think this is the first time I've walked in right under their noses, Alexandra?" He winked at her, and extended an

arm. "You haven't learned about Polyjuice Potion at school yet, obviously."

Hesitantly, she took his arm, and let him lead her onto the dance floor. The wizard band was now playing a slow waltz.

"This is your idea of speaking more freely?" she whispered.

"It's an opportunity to dance with my daughter."

She was watching the people around them, out of the corner of her eye. Everyone else was watching them, and pretending not to.

"Don't the Aurors know about Poly-Potions?" she asked. Her face was practically pressed against his chest, and she was trying to keep her voice almost inaudible, but he chuckled aloud.

"Of course they do. And they also know spells for listening to whispered conversations from across a crowded ballroom." She jerked upright at that and stared at him, and almost whipped her head around to try to spot the nearest Auror, but he gripped her arms tightly and murmured, "Calm down, my dear. Don't look so panicked."

She breathed in and out several times, as they continued to rotate and step in time to the waltz. The Aurors watching the dance floor were indeed staring at them. She could see the expression on the face of the nearest Auror – he looked rather taken aback, but none of them approached the young girl and the much older man.

"I'm better than they are," Abraham Thorn said, once she was looking at him again.

"So we can talk, and no one else can hear us right now?"

"They'll hear me engaging in harmless flirtation, and you giggling."

She scowled at him. "I don't giggle."

"Don't scowl, my dear."

She continued scowling. "Maybe you should dance with Julia. Do you know how much she was looking forward to this night? And now everyone is pointing and whispering, and Maximilian has to bully younger boys into dancing with her..."

"Because of me. And a spiteful old political opponent who's forgotten my warning, long ago, never to involve my children." Her father's borrowed face darkened, for a moment, and it was frightening to behold. "He will remember, soon."

"Cursing some tool isn't going to make Julia feel better," Alexandra told him quietly.

He looked down at her, and smiled. "Clever and wise. I'm so happy to see my children together, and you and Julia becoming fast friends. And Thalia has welcomed you into her home, as I knew she would."

"You still owe me a lot of answers. And speaking of clever, I notice you have a habit of changing the subject whenever I start asking questions."

He nodded slowly. "I take it Claudia's answers didn't satisfy you?"

"She didn't give me any answers. She said she didn't want to talk about you, or the wizarding world." Alexandra looked down. "She thinks I'm a freak. She hates that her daughter is a witch."

"I'm sure she didn't say that." He cupped his hand beneath her chin, and tilted her head up towards him.

"She didn't have to." Alexandra's expression, for a moment, became fearsome too. "What did you do to her?" she hissed. "Why does she hate you, and me, and the wizarding world, so much?"

It was the first time she ever saw her father look away. Even wearing someone else's face, it was clearly not something he was used to.

They twirled and separated, then came back together, giving him a moment to compose himself.

"I abandoned her," he said simply. He looked Alexandra in the eye. "I allowed her to see the wizarding world, because she wanted to see it, and then I told her that she could never be part of it, that wizards and Muggles don't mix, and that I couldn't stay with her. And that someday, my child would leave her world and join mine, and there was nothing she could do about it."

Alexandra stared at him. "You made her hate me," she whispered.

"Claudia does not hate you, Alexandra. You know better."

"Why would you tell her those things?" Alexandra was struggling to keep her voice from rising.

"So that she would abandon all thought of ever being part of my life, or this world. It was better for her that way."

"Really? Better for her, or easier for you? What about what was better for me? If wizards and Muggles don't mix, why did you mix with her in the first place?" Alexandra asked angrily.

"I do not like your tone, young lady. I am willing to endure much from you, but not disrespect – towards me, or Claudia."

"Oh, you want respect!" she hissed. "Or what? You'll curse me?" A second later, she wondered if she'd gone too far, as his eyes flashed and she could feel a chill spreading over her skin and making her shiver from head to toe.

Then the wave of dread faded, and he smiled, a little less warmly. "I'm being very patient, Alexandra."

Shaken, but seized with a sudden fury that only made it harder for her to express herself, Alexandra struggled to find words, wanting to say something poignant and meaningful, and not sound like a petulant child. But she could only stare at her disguised father, as the waltz ended, and she realized she had no idea what to say.

"I was patient for twelve years," she muttered, and gave him a sarcastic curtsy, then spun around and stalked away.

She felt foolish almost as soon as she turned her back on him. She still had things to ask him, and she knew she hadn't handled herself in the cool, mature manner she always had in her imagined conversations with her father. She walked to one of the exits, and looked at the two Aurors standing there, regarding her with flat expressions, and just shook her head and turned around. But she couldn't see the man she'd danced with anymore. A few minutes later, Maximilian found her, and asked, "Have you had enough of dancing yet?"

She nodded.

He smiled wanly. "Good. Our carriage will be out front shortly." He offered her his arm. "Julia is with Mother. I hope this wasn't too unpleasant for you."

She thought about her conversation with Ms. King, and watching Julia dance, and briefly, her dance with Payton Smith. Now why would that make her face feel warm all of a sudden? "It was all right. I saw you dance with a few girls. But let me guess – none good enough to be the future bride of Maximilian Alexander King?"

He laughed sourly, as she took his arm. "Come on, wicked little sister. Let's go home."

Julia was mostly quiet on the ride back to Croatoa – not her usual bubbly self, though she insisted that she had had a good time, and that she didn't care if all of Roanoke now knew who her father was.

"Some boys were nice," she said. But Alexandra, in the brief time she'd known her, had learned to read her half-sister's face, and knew that she'd been hurt and disappointed.

The house-elves fawned over them, back in the mansion, and asked who they'd danced with, and whether the Governor's house-elves were well-bred, and, to Alexandra's surprise, they even asked, with winks and elbows directed at one another, whether any of the children had found 'sweethearts' at the Cotillion.

Alexandra wanted to warn them not to pester Julia with questions like that, except she was sure the guilt would be overwhelming if the poor elves realized how much such innocent inquiries stung their young mistress.

"It was lovely, really. Did you have a good time?" Julia asked, as she applied a potion to Alexandra's face that made all of the makeup and charms evaporate. She waved her wand, and in the mirror, Alexandra saw her hair suddenly go loose and straight again, as the charms Olin had put on it dissipated.

"Yeah," Alexandra replied. She decided not to mention their father. "It was really interesting." That much was true.

"Did you dance with any nice boys?" Julia asked, with a small smile, now undoing her own cosmetic charms.

"Yes." She thought of Payton again. He had been nice enough. "But don't get too excited – I didn't 'find me's a sweetheart.'" She imitated Nina's voice.

Julia laughed. She turned and gave her sister a hug, and a kiss on the cheek. "I'm glad. I was afraid you'd just skulk about all evening, afraid to discover that you might actually enjoy dancing with boys." Alexandra blushed, and Julia yawned. "Oh, but I'm tired now!"

Alexandra nodded. Whether because she was tired, or for other reasons, Julia clearly didn't want to stay up talking tonight. "Me, too. I'll see you tomorrow." She hesitated, and then gave Julia a quick peck on the cheek back. Julia smiled at her, as she left her sister's room and returned to her own.

She hadn't been lying. She was tired. But she didn't really feel like sleeping. She took off the locket and laid it on the desk in front of her, and stared at it for a long time, while Charlie hopped from one shoulder to the other, not quite daring to snatch it out from beneath Alexandra's nose, but clearly coveting the shiny thing.

If she closed her hand around it, she wondered, would she hear her father's voice? And did she want to?

Eventually, she peeled off the Clytemnestra Kirk robe, put on her pajamas, and crawled onto the canopy bed, and fell asleep there, without even sliding under the covers.

When she awoke, it was still dark. She was under the covers, though, and when she lifted her head, she could see that the shiny gold robe, which she'd left slung over the back of a chair, was gone.

Deezie, she thought. Then she heard again the flapping sound that had woken her up.

"Charlie?" she whispered. From the cage hanging by her bed, Charlie made a soft warbling sound, annoyed at being disturbed. Charlie wasn't the one flapping around.

She rose from her bed and walked to the window, which she'd left open in case Charlie wanted to go outside. The lights around Croatoa were out, now, but it was a starlit night, and Alexandra saw something dark gliding through the air, down the hill towards the woods. Although she could not make out much more than a brief silhouette, Alexandra knew that shape intuitively.

"Hagar," she whispered.

Behind her, Charlie croaked in alarm, and then Alexandra saw another shadow moving away from the mansion, this one on foot.

She could only see his back, and he was wrapped in a black cloak, making him a mysterious silhouette like Hagar, but Maximilian too, Alexandra knew on sight. He was following his father's familiar, down the hill and into the woods.

Alexandra stared, watching her brother until he was almost out of sight, and then, without thinking about what she was doing, she ran to the huge closet where Deezie had hung her clothes, and found a casual robe she could throw on quickly, a cloak, and her boots. She dressed hastily, and then held up a finger and whispered, "Shh!" admonishingly, as Charlie began fussing.

She didn't know how Maximilian had snuck out of the house. The house-elves seemed to sense whenever any of the humans were moving around, no matter the time of day, and she doubted she'd be able to talk Deezie into letting her leave, without telling Ms. King. She looked at the window, and bit her lip.

She'd once jumped off the roof of her house, when she little, and her magic had allowed her to land safely. But last year, she'd tried the same stunt from her second-floor window at Charmbridge Academy, and broken her ankle.

She walked to the window and looked down. Not as high as the fall from her dorm room window at Charmbridge, but plenty high enough to break an ankle again.

Charlie squawked as Alexandra climbed onto the window sill and perched there.

"Shh!" she admonished again. She took out her wand, and began composing a rhyme in her head.

She really hoped her 'doggerel verse' worked this time; she didn't know a proper Falling Charm.

Taking a deep breath, she said:

"I'm not a bird, I can't fly,
but I'm not really up so high.
So just one hop, and then I'll be
on the ground... one... two... three!"

On the count of three, she jumped.

Maximilian had said witches didn't get killed by mundane accidents. But Alexandra knew from experience that witches weren't immune to gravity.

Except when they were. She landed on the ground, still holding her wand, and stood up slowly. She lifted one foot and wiggled her ankle, then the other. Nothing hurt. She grinned in triumph.

Charlie was still perched up on the sill. She waved a hand, beckoning the bird. "Come on, Charlie!" she whispered.

Charlie flapped down to her, landing on her shoulder.

"Now, don't make any noise," she commanded. And she pulled the cloak around herself, and began hurrying downhill, following after Maximilian.

Her Father's Bidding

It was a cool night, and Alexandra could feel a breeze blowing in from the ocean. It was less noticeable as she descended down the hill, but she was becoming chilly in her pajamas, even beneath the robe and the cloak. She felt no fear as she approached the trees, but she did slow her steps a little, wondering how she was going to track Maximilian. Her impulse to follow him had been just that – an impulse. Now that she was out of the house, down the hill, and about to enter a dark forest that she'd been told was both haunted and dangerous, she realized that she probably could have used a plan.

Hagar, she thought, was leading Maximilian to their father. She turned her head to look at her own raven, still sitting on her shoulder.

“Charlie,” she ordered. “Find Maximilian for me.”

Charlie had been remarkably cooperative thus far, being woken up and then carried along on Alexandra's sudden unplanned adventure, but the raven squawked in protest now.

“Find Max,” Alexandra repeated. “But don't let him or Hagar see you.”

Charlie was smart, and Alexandra usually felt that her familiar understood her perfectly. But she worried that she might be asking too much this time. The raven looked at her, and then took off, wings beating against the night air. Not far away, she heard an owl's call, and realized that the woods might be dangerous for Charlie, too.

That didn't stop her from proceeding forward, though.

At first, the path Maximilian had taken was clear, but soon there was only undergrowth and leaves beneath her feet, and then she was pushing her way through briars and brambles. The sound seemed loud to her, and she stopped every few yards, to listen for either noises Maximilian might be making ahead of her, or indications that she'd been heard. She heard only more forest sounds. She shivered and was grateful for the thickness of her cloak, and her boots, keeping the briars and branches from scratching at her.

Up in the trees, she saw a red light pulsate briefly and then dim, and something scampered off through the branches. She watched, and saw more red lights up in the treetops, blinking in retreat. She wished she'd taken Magical Ecology after all. She hoped whatever those things were were fleeing from her, and not from something else.

She kept her wand in her hand, ready to cast a hex at anything that came out of the shadows at her. But she tried not to let herself get too tense – she didn't want to hex Charlie.

Charlie didn't return, though, which was starting to bother her. As she proceeded deeper into the woods, and was surrounded by the sounds of things creeping, slithering, hopping, and flapping all around her, she realized she had no idea where she was going, and might, in fact, be lost.

When a ghostly figure appeared in the darkness in front of her, she was actually relieved. A ghost couldn't hurt her. It might even be helpful.

This ghost didn't look very friendly, though. He was a bearded man in a tall hat and voluminous robes, lined with ruffles and lace, and more rings than Alexandra had ever seen one person wearing before, clustered on his ghostly white fingers. She could see right through him, but it had become very dark, with the treetops hiding the sky from view, so he was a bright glow between the trees.

“Hi,” she said. “I think I might be lost.”

The ghost scowled at her.

“I don't suppose you saw another, uh, mortal, walking this way? A boy, a few years older than me?”

“You mean Maximilian,” the ghost said gravely.

“You know him?”

“Of course I know him.” The ghostly wizard's scowl deepened. “He and his father are the last of the Thorns.” He stared at her. “What are

you doing in these woods, little girl? Are you a witch? These woods are too dangerous for children, even witches."

"I am a witch." Alexandra held up her wand. "And I'm following Maximilian. Do you know where he went?"

"Why are you following Maximilian?"

"Because I want to know where he's going."

The ghost looked more annoyed. "Who are you, girl?" he demanded.

She drew herself up proudly, looked the ghost in the eye, and declared: "I'm Alexandra Quick," letting her voice ring out in the forest, as if her name was one that even a ghost who'd died hundreds of years ago should know.

He raised an eyebrow at her, and shook his head. "I have never heard of the Quicks."

"No?" she retorted. "Well, Maximilian and his father aren't the last of the Thorns, unless you don't count girls."

"Girls do not carry the name." The wizard regarded her for a moment. "Are you one of Abraham's daughters?"

She nodded, biting back another argumentative comment.

"Then you are my great-great-great-great granddaughter," he sighed. "I am Absalom Thorn."

"Oh." She looked at her four-times great grandfather, wondering how many other ancestors might be haunting these woods. "Pleased to meet you. Do you know where my brother is?"

"Meeting his father at the family crypt," Absalom Thorn replied, in a disapproving tone. "Abraham meets his son there, in the dead of night, disturbing the peace of his ancestors. He banishes us from the crypt, fearful that one of us might be interrogated by the Inquisitors."

Alexandra shook her head, amazed that the Office of Special Inquisitions would even interrogate ghosts, but Thorn seemed to interpret this as a gesture of sympathy, because his expression softened, even as he continued to lecture her. "You shouldn't be following your brother into these woods, girl. We ghosts are no threat to you – not even the red savages – but there are living things here that are. Not to mention pits, quicksand, ravines..."

"Will you show me the way to the family crypt? I didn't even know I had ancestors here."

The wizard opened his mouth again, then sighed. "I suspect your father will not be pleased."

Too bad, she thought, but she suspected her great-great-great-great grandfather would not be impressed by her lack of filial respect. As she followed Absalom Thorn through the trees, something flapped by her ear, startling her, and she almost stabbed Charlie with her wand.

"Charlie!" she gasped, as her familiar landed on her shoulder.

"Alexandra," said the raven.

"Shh. We have to be quiet," she whispered, as she tried to follow the ghost without tripping over branches or crashing loudly through bushes. "Did you lead him to me?"

Charlie didn't answer, and neither did Absalom Thorn, who was on the verge of drifting out of sight, unimpeded by the forest's undergrowth, and apparently not inclined to slow down for his corporeal descendant. Alexandra moved as quietly as she could, but she was forced to sacrifice stealth for speed.

She saw more ghosts milling about ahead. They all parted for Alexandra and her great-great-great-great grandfather. Most of them looked like the elder Thorn, dressed in archaic wizard clothing, though one man was wearing a uniform and carrying a sword.

"Are Abraham and Maximilian still in the crypt?" Absalom Thorn asked.

"Yes, sir," replied the man in uniform. He was dark-haired (as dark as a ghost's hair could look, anyway), and rather handsome. He looked curiously at Alexandra and her raven.

"This is another of Abraham's children," Thorn told them.

"What are you doing here?" asked a woman with voluminous robes billowing around her, and an equally voluminous bonnet surrounding her head like a great ghostly mushroom. Her tone was disapproving, but Alexandra was not paying attention to the ghosts. She was looking at a large, stone building, covered in moss and ivy, sitting amidst the trees, with no path leading to or from it. It looked completely out of place, as if the forest had simply grown around it. With the only illumination being the few stars whose light penetrated through the foliage above, and the glow of the ghosts, it was a looming, spooky presence. But Alexandra felt excitement, not fear, and any nervousness was due to uncertainty: how could she sneak close enough to find out what her father and Maximilian were talking about, without getting caught?

She began to move forward, picking her feet up carefully as they tangled in vines, trying not to step on branches or old leaves.

"What are you doing?" demanded Absalom Thorn, while the woman who had addressed her earlier began muttering about "disagreeable modern witches, raised ill and without manners!"

"I'm going to join my father and my brother," she whispered. "I'll tell them you're mad at being kicked out of your crypt."

"They know this already," grumbled Thorn, but he didn't call after her, and none of the ghosts followed her.

She had to go halfway around the large shadowy structure, until she found what looked like an entrance, and saw light coming from inside. Charlie stirred restlessly on her shoulder, and she put a finger over her lips. "Shh, Charlie," she pleaded, in a tiny, almost breathless voice. The raven sat still, but she could feel the bird's talons digging into her shoulder. She winced slightly, but didn't push Charlie away.

Instead, she crept closer, until she set foot on a cold marble step, and then she turned sideways, tiptoeing up to the entrance of the crypt, afraid some of the light spilling from within would touch her.

“... two more months, Maximilian! Only two more months before you leave Charmbridge! You've been there for the better part of a year, and you are no closer than when you first joined the Mors Mortis Society.”

Alexandra recognized her father's voice. He sounded irate and disappointed.

“I'm doing the best I can,” Maximilian replied. His tone was sullen.

“Are you truly? From what you've told me, the Dearborn girl seems to be closer to Mr. Manuelito than you are.”

“Do you want me to try getting 'close' to him like that? I don't think that's the way he bends, but —”

“DO NOT BE SMART WITH ME!” Abraham Thorn's voice rose to a roar, echoing out of the crypt and causing more night birds to flutter out of the trees around it, chirping and croaking in alarm.

This was followed by a long period of silence. Alexandra's heart was hammering in her chest. She wanted very badly to lean forward, just a little, to see her father and brother inside, but she remembered how she'd been caught when she was eavesdropping on Darla and John.

When her father spoke again, he sounded perfectly calm, as if he hadn't just erupted in anger.

“Your name and your talents should have been enough. Have you been holding back, Maximilian? Have you balked at doing everything you can to convince him of your commitment to the Dark Arts?”

Maximilian was silent.

“You do understand how important this is?” Abraham Thorn asked gently.

"I do. Of course I do. I wish you'd stop questioning my commitment." Maximilian sounded sullen again.

There was a pause, then their father said, "You should let Alexandra —"

"No."

Alexandra was impressed – and proud – that Maximilian still had the nerve to defy their father like that. But it sounded as if this was a recurring disagreement, and she held her breath, trying to hear what followed.

"She's clever and resourceful. She would have been enormously helpful if she'd stayed in the Society with you, but even without being a member, she could perhaps influence her friend..."

"I don't think they're friends, anymore. And Alexandra isn't interested in any of this. She's just a silly girl, Father. She does things on impulse that seem exciting or rebellious, because she has a contrary nature, but she's like Julia, she doesn't actually take anything seriously. And I don't want her involved."

"I don't think your assessment of Alexandra is correct, Maximilian. She isn't like my other daughters. And this is too important—"

"Alexandra!"

Alexandra jumped. The voice came from overhead, and when she looked up, she saw a large, winged shape sitting atop a marble column, looking down at her.

"Alexandra!" the voice squawked again, and Alexandra raised a finger to her lips and hissed, "Ssh!" knowing it was already too late. Hagar loudly called out, "Alexandra!" a third time, and then Charlie launched off her shoulder, flapping and squawking, but Hagar spread her wings, cawed once, and with a snap of her beak, sent Charlie diving frantically away.

Then someone grabbed her by the back of her cloak, and lifted her off the ground.

“Leggo!” she shouted, trying to whip her wand around to hex whoever it was, but a strong hand closed around her wrist, and then she was spun about, and she found herself staring up at the long-haired blond man she had danced with at the Cotillion – or rather, the man whose appearance her father had borrowed.

Her father and brother had both rushed to the entrance of the crypt, and were now holding up their lit wands and staring at Alexandra and the man who had seized her.

“Alexandra.” Her father did not sound quite as surprised as he should have, nor as angry as she expected. “Were you spying on us?”

“No, I just like hanging around crypts,” she snapped, glaring at the blond man. She saw no point in lying, but it was difficult to look at her father.

The blond man smirked, and she didn't see her father's reaction, but his voice, when he spoke again, sounded almost amused. “Let her go, Zachary.”

Zachary released her. She thought of hexing him, for a moment, but quickly decided against it, and shoved her wand back into a pocket in her cloak. She gave him one more glare, then reluctantly turned to face her father, rubbing her wrist.

He was standing in the entrance to the crypt with his arms folded across his chest, while Maximilian, behind him, looked murderous – and pale.

“How much did you overhear?” her father asked quietly.

Though he seemed to be taking this with good grace – and he had been, as he kept telling her, remarkably patient – there was something about his tone that made Alexandra think that lying or smarting off right now would be unwise. So she replied, in a voice even more sullen than Maximilian's, “You knew all along that Max

was in the Mors Mortis Society. You approved! He's been on a mission for you, not for the Wizard Justice Department." She turned her gaze on her brother, who was glaring at her, but his gaze wavered when she glared back at him. "You've been lying to me all along. You've both been lying to me!"

"Maximilian has been trying to protect you."

"I don't want protection!" she yelled. "I want the truth!"

"Stop shouting," her father commanded. He spoke calmly – perfectly calmly – yet any impulse Alexandra had to yell again died instantly. She forced herself to look at him again, glowering in silence.

Maximilian spoke: "I will not involve her." He couldn't meet his father's eyes, when Abraham Thorn turned his head, but he managed to keep his voice steady. "I'll do what you ask, Father. I will not fail. But without her." He gestured at Alexandra. "I meant what I said before."

Alexandra was burning with curiosity – and anger – but held her tongue. The older wizard looked at his son for a long time, then turned to look at his daughter.

"As you wish," he said at last. "Take your sister back to the house, then."

Maximilian nodded, and stepped around his father, to stand next to Alexandra.

"That's it?" Alexandra demanded. "No explanation? Aren't you even going to speak to Julia? Or does she not deserve any attention either, since she's just another one of your daughters?"

Maximilian muttered something – maybe a warning – and she heard the other wizard, 'Zachary,' let out a startled breath.

Her father's eyes flashed. "Alexandra, I'm making many allowances for you, but if you are intent on finding out just where the limit of my patience lies, it is close, and I assure you, you do not want to arrive

there.” But almost as soon as he said that, his face softened, and he reached a hand out and put it on her cheek.

“I will speak to Julia, though not tonight,” he said quietly. “I love all my daughters. Never doubt that, my dear child.”

She stared back at him, wanting to say a great many things. What she said at last was, “I met our great-great-etcetera grandfather, Absalom Thorn. Did you really kick our ancestors out of their crypt?”

He blinked, then smiled ruefully. “Only for an hour. And Absalom Thorn likes to complain. Do you really think ghosts spend all their time congregating in a crypt? I've done them no harm, Alexandra.”

He leaned forward, and kissed her cheek, before she could pull away. She wasn't sure whether she would have, if he'd given her an opportunity to do so, but she held still, thinking about everything she'd heard and what her father and her brother had told her, and what they hadn't. “Next time, we will talk in less dreary surroundings, and in more pleasant circumstances.”

“Another promise,” she replied, in a flat tone.

Abraham Thorn sighed, then looked at Maximilian. “Take care of your sisters, Maximilian.”

He nodded. “I will.”

Hagar descended onto Thorn's shoulder, as if responding to a wordless summons, and he nodded to the other man. Then, with a sudden puff of air, the two wizards were gone.

“Come on, Alex.” Maximilian put a hand on her shoulder. She shrugged it off and began stomping back in the direction she'd come.

Charlie returned to her shoulder, with a quiet squawk. She reached a hand up and stroked the bird's head.

“You're angry at me,” Maximilian muttered, as he followed after her.

"You think?" She realized she didn't really know the way back, but she assumed Maximilian would say something if they were going the wrong way. She certainly wasn't going to ask. They passed through the gathering of ghosts again.

"Your sister lacks courtesy, much as your father does, Maximilian," complained Absalom Thorn, as Alexandra walked past him without a word or a glance in his direction.

"I'm sorry, sir," Maximilian replied. "I can't do much about my father. I'll speak to my sister."

"Don't apologize for me!" she snapped over her shoulder.

They continued walking through the woods. Maximilian was silent, but eventually they reached a clearing, and then Alexandra could see Croatoa before them, sitting at the top of the hill. She continued walking up the path to the house.

When they were almost to the door, Maximilian put a hand on her shoulder again, stopping her.

"Don't speak of this to Julia," he warned. It sounded like half request, half command. She turned to face him.

"Of course not," she replied. "Julia's just a silly girl, like me. We're only interested in silly things."

"Alex –"

She didn't let him finish. She opened the front doors, and walked inside, and then stopped as she was immediately confronted by Deezie and Rolly. She'd forgotten about the house-elves.

"What is Miss doing out so late?" exclaimed Deezie, looking horrified, with her hands over her mouth.

"Why didn't Master tell us he was taking his sister with him?" Rolly moaned, as Maximilian entered.

"Deezie will fix Miss a bath," Deezie offered, "snap-snap-snap!"

"No!" Alexandra whispered, and then Maximilian ordered: "Deezie, Rolly, return to your rooms. Don't speak of this to anyone. Especially not Mother. Understand?"

The elves paused, looked at him unhappily, and then nodded.

"Go." Maximilian's voice was cold and commanding, sounding much like his father for a moment. The two elves disappeared with a crack.

"Why would they obey you over your mother?" Alexandra asked.

"Deezie and Rolly stay here and obey Mother because Father told them to," he replied quietly. "But they're still his elves."

She turned and looked at him silently for a moment. She could only see half his face; the house was lit by a few candles, but it was mostly dark. Then she walked upstairs, with her brother following, but they didn't say anything more to each other as they returned to their rooms.

"I'm going to miss you, Alexandra," Julia sighed. She wrapped her arms around her sister, squeezing her tightly, and Alexandra returned the hug easily, though without squeezing so hard. "I'm so glad to have another sister! I hope you enjoyed yourself, even if the Cotillion didn't... didn't turn out exactly the way we hoped."

"I enjoyed everything. I'm really glad I came," Alexandra replied truthfully. She smiled at the older girl. "I'm glad to have a sister, too."

They were back at the Blacksburg Wizardrail station, and the two of them were alone, for a moment, except for Charlie, sitting in a cage at Alexandra's feet. Maximilian was tipping a porter-elf and giving him directions as to the disposition of their luggage, and Ms. King was standing by the carriage.

Julia's eyes glistened, as if she might be about to cry, but she kissed Alexandra on the cheek. "I hope you're glad to have a brother, too. I know you and Max quarreled again; I can tell by the way you're being

so short with each other. But it will be a long ride back to Chicago if you don't make up."

Alexandra nodded. "It'll be all right," she assured Julia, though in truth, she had no idea what she was going to say to Maximilian on the long trip back. She was still blisteringly angry at him, though she'd mostly managed not to show it to Julia and Ms. King.

"Please write," her sister urged, as Maximilian headed their way. "And come visit again, maybe in the summer?"

"I'd like that." Alexandra nodded. "And I will write."

"You're always welcome here, Alexandra." Ms. King had joined Maximilian at their side. She held out her arms, and took Alexandra into another smothering embrace. "I mean that."

"Thank you," Alexandra replied, in a muffled voice, until Ms. King released her. "I really enjoyed myself."

"And you didn't even see half of the island, let alone the rest of New Roanoke!" Julia exclaimed.

"Next time," Maximilian promised. Alexandra looked away from him, and Julia sighed.

Maximilian and Julia embraced, and Julia kissed her brother on both cheeks. "Behave yourself, and be nice, you great awful snarly. I hope Charmbridge has taught you some manners by the time we return home for the summer."

"If I haven't learned any yet, what will another two months do?" he replied dryly. He kissed Julia back. "Study hard, and if you're ever having problems – if you start hearing bad things at Salem, now that —"

"I'll be fine, Max. Your sisters are actually not frail, helpless creatures who will be done in by gossip and nasty rumors." Julia smiled at him, and Alexandra snickered.

Only as Maximilian and Alexandra began ascending the steps did it occur to Alexandra to ask, "Isn't Julia taking a train to Salem? Does hers leave later?"

"She's going by Portkey," Maximilian replied. "The Portkeys here are down the road, not at the Wizardrail station like in Chicago."

Alexandra remembered now the booths she'd seen at the Chicago Wizardrail station. She immediately wanted to know more, and she could see that Maximilian knew it, so she bit her tongue, while curiosity warred with her desire to stay angry at him.

She didn't have to make a decision immediately, as inside the station, they found long lines, quite unlike the sparse crowd that had greeted them on arrival. A sign flashing overhead said: "The Roanoke Wizardrail Auror Authority Has Imposed Travel Restrictions On All Wizardrail and Portkey Transportation. Please Be Patient."

"Travel restrictions?" Alexandra muttered, as she saw the witches and wizards waiting to board the trains pass between two cloaked, red-vested Aurors, who were holding out their wands, conducting some sort of inspection on each passenger.

"They always do something like this, after an incident, to show they're still in control," Maximilian muttered back.

"Incident?" Alexandra's curiosity was too great now to pretend she wasn't speaking to him.

"Don't you ever actually listen to the Wizard Wireless? Official story is, the Governor of Roanoke and half his staff, and most of the Aurors who were watching the Cotillion, are suffering from ghost sickness, unleashed on them by renegade spirits."

"Ghosts can do that?" Alexandra wondered if maybe she should have been more respectful to her great-great-great-great grandfather, but Maximilian shook his head.

"Not unless there's Dark magic involved. Ghost sickness is an old witches' tale. They blame things on ghosts when they don't want to

admit that someone used a curse that none of the Governor's security detail could stop."

Alexandra thought about that, as they inched forward in line. An old witch in traditional black robes and a pointed witch's hat squawked indignantly as the Aurors pulled her out of line, holding up a snake that she was insisting was her familiar. They threatened to snap her wand if she kept fussing. She was taken away, into one of the station's back rooms. Another wizard was taken out of line, for interrogation concerning something he had in his pocket.

"Anything they can use as an excuse to accuse someone of Dark affiliations," Maximilian muttered.

"I have to go to the bathroom," Alexandra announced suddenly.

"What?" he demanded, giving her a funny look, but she turned and hurriedly walked to the station's restroom, which had a sign saying 'Witches' and a stick figure with a triangular skirt and hat. She carried Charlie with her, and a couple of older witches gave her odd looks as she brought the caged raven into the restroom. She looked around, and was relieved to see an open window, high on the far wall. She went into the stall closest to that wall.

She unlatched Charlie's cage, and took her locket from around her neck.

"Charlie," she whispered, listening for other witches entering nearby stalls. "I need you to fly away. Find me later. Can you do that?"

Charlie clucked. Alexandra hoped that indicated agreement. She wrapped the chain around one leg, and the raven's talons closed on the gold locket.

"Bring this back to me, Charlie," she whispered, and leaned forward to kiss the raven on the top of its head. Charlie made a soft warbling noise, and then Alexandra lifted her arm, tossing the bird into the air, and Charlie took off, rising to the window and flapping off into the sky.

Maximilian was waiting for her when she emerged from the restroom. She had left the cage in a waste basket behind her, after using her wand to crumple it into a tangled ball of crushed wire. His eyes fell on her empty hands, and noting the absence of Charlie, he nodded. "I didn't think of that," he mumbled.

"I figured," she muttered back.

They got back into line, and inched their way forward again. When they reached the Aurors, the two wizards waved their wands at them, and demanded to know their names.

"Maximilian King," said Maximilian.

"Alexandra Quick," said Alexandra.

The Aurors looked at them, and studied a scroll one was holding. Alexandra could see an image shifting and flowing on the parchment, as if faces were forming there to match the names, but then the Auror lifted it so that she could no longer see over the edge. They both scrutinized the two teenagers again, and Alexandra was sure she and her brother were going to be pulled from the line. She knew the Confederation Wizard Census recorded their real names.

"Go on," said the Auror not holding the scroll, waving his wand. Both their eyes stayed on Alexandra and Maximilian as they continued past the checkpoint, and boarded the Roanoke Underhill to Chicago.

Alexandra sat in their first-class compartment, arms folded across her chest, with the window open, waiting for Charlie. Maximilian quietly took off his cloak and uniform jacket, folding them neatly before he sat down opposite her, and studied her.

"That was good thinking," he said at last.

She didn't answer.

"Are you giving me the silent treatment again?" he asked.

She looked out the window, and Maximilian shook his head and leaned back in his seat, and didn't say anything else for a while.

Alexandra was starting to worry, as the train blew its horn and began to vibrate with movement, and then Charlie came flapping through the window to land on the table between her and Maximilian.

She kissed her fingers and laid them on the bird's beak, then carefully unwound the locket from around the raven's leg, and let her familiar have it to play with. This mollified Charlie a bit, as did being free to flap about the compartment uncaged, though Maximilian didn't look thrilled by this.

As the train began moving, Alexandra took out her book, *The Lands Below, and Other Native Muggle Tales*. Maximilian let her read until they had passed Dominion Station and gone underground, and then he asked, "How long are you planning to keep this up?"

"Keep what up?" Alexandra asked, turning a page without looking at him.

"Giving me the silent treatment. Acting like a brat."

"Oh, until I have something important to tell you, like whether I've found a nice pureblood boy to marry, or when you have something important to tell me, like whether you think my hair would look better in curls, or if I should wear a lavender robe or a blue and silver one... you know, important things that girls care about."

"You're being foolish!" he snapped.

"Well, of course I am! I'm just a silly girl who doesn't take anything seriously. Just like Julia, who you obviously think is an empty-headed, spoiled little booger..."

"Julia is probably smarter than I am. When she's not giggling over boys or agonizing over what to wear, she has a sharp mind, and she doesn't miss much. And you take far too many things seriously, more than is good for you. You're clever too, wicked clever."

Alexandra looked up at him slowly. Maximilian was regarding her with a perfectly serious expression.

"Then why did you say what you said to our father?"

"He'll use you, Alexandra," he said wearily.

"Like he's using you?"

Maximilian nodded.

"So you have been lying to me all along." Her eyes smoldered. "You know how much I hate being lied to! You know how much I hate it when people hide the truth from me! I believed you! I trusted you! And you're nothing but a big fat liar!"

Maximilian winced. "I wanted to protect you..."

"STOP PROTECTING ME!" she shouted, so loudly they might have heard her in the next compartment. Charlie squawked in alarm, almost dropping the locket. Maximilian winced again, but glared at her.

"Lying to me isn't protecting me. My mother, my father, Ms. Grimm, everyone's been lying to me," Alexandra said, in a quieter voice. "I wanted you to be different."

Maximilian looked away.

"Why do you do what he says, if you don't think it's right?" she demanded.

"I didn't say I don't think it's right," he muttered.

"It's just too dangerous for me to be involved? But you'll let him make you do Dark Arts stuff you don't want to do? And watch while Darla does things she shouldn't be doing? And all for what? So he can keep giving us all a bad reputation? How is it going to make our lives better if he goes and curses the Governor of Roanoke? Like that's not going to make people fear him even more? And you play mysterious

secret agent games to help him, and then lie to your sisters, and your mother. Your friends, too, I'll bet."

"Stop it," he grated through his teeth, and she did stop, because she could see how her words stung him. His face was drawn up, angry and unhappy, and his entire body was tense as he sat across from her.

"I don't agree with everything Father does," he said at last. "But I believe in his cause. I agreed to help him, on the condition that he leave Julia out of it. It's not like he's just randomly cursing politicians, Alexandra. He mixes up with some really Dark sorcerers, he uses magic no one should use, and he believes the ends justify the means. I don't know if they do. But this isn't a game."

"Tell me, Max," she pleaded. "Tell me what's going on. I've kept all your secrets, even when I shouldn't have. Don't tell me I'm just a girl, or I'm only thirteen. I'm clever enough to figure out for myself whether I want to let our father use me." She studied him, as he hunched his shoulders and looked more miserable and uncertain, and she spoke more softly. "Wouldn't you rather be able to talk about it? I know you can't tell Julia. She's stronger than you think she is, but I think she's already made her mind up about our father. You can't say anything to your mother, she'd go nuts. And your friends wouldn't understand, would they? My friends still don't really understand, even after they found out you're my brother."

He looked up at her, and they stared at one another for several long minutes. The train rattled and rumbled, in the darkness, but that was the only sound. Even Charlie was quiet and still.

"You have a dark side to you," he murmured. "Like him."

"So do you," she replied quietly. "Don't pretend you don't. That's what makes us different from Julia, isn't it? She might be as strong as us and as smart as us, but she could never go there."

"I don't want you to go there."

“That's not your choice to make.” She glanced at Charlie, who seemed to be studying both of them as intently as they were studying each other. She reached out a hand, and stroked the bird's glossy black feathers. Charlie clucked soothingly. “I quit the Mors Mortis Society because I couldn't stand what they were doing. That was my choice. But you stayed. So who should be worrying about who?”

Maximilian smiled wanly. “You can be pretty convincing, when you're not throwing a tantrum.”

She gave him a sour smile in return. “I can be wicked clever, too. And resourceful. I might even be helpful.”

He let out a long breath, staring out the window, though there was nothing but darkness there.

“There are ways to make you give up secrets,” he said. “Methods the WJD can use, if they suspect you're lying to them.”

“You mean like the Cruciatus Curse?” Her eyes were fixed on Charlie, as she continued stroking the bird's feathers, and her voice was barely audible.

He jerked his head around to stare at her, then shook his head. “Less crude than that. The Cruciatus Curse is supposed to be illegal, no matter what – though Father says the Confederation does use it, in secret, when they can get away with it. But there are things like Legilimency and Veritaserum. Father has trained me a little in Occlumency – that's shielding your thoughts against Legilimency – but I'd never be able to withstand a real interrogation. I have a potion I can take if I think I'm going to be dosed with Veritaserum. It... reacts badly in combination with Veritaserum, and makes it look like a Veritaserum overdose.”

Alexandra blinked, as horrified as she was fascinated. Maximilian really was playing secret agent games. She felt a flash of anger at her father. Who was he to be making his sixteen-year-old son do such things? But then she remembered telling Maximilian, not two minutes ago, that what she did wasn't his choice to make. She could hardly pass judgment on his choices.

“So you're saying you can't tell me because Diana Grimm or someone else from the WJD might use Legilimency or Veritaserum on me?”

“If they thought you know more than you're telling them.” He nodded.

“But I already know you're a double-agent working for our father,” she pointed out. “So if they get that out of me, you're screwed anyway.”

He frowned. “I don't like the words you use.”

She rolled her eyes. “The point is, I know enough now that if I can't convince Ms. Grimm that I'm still just an angry teenage girl, and all Dad has ever said to me is that he loves me and wishes we could spend more time together –” Her tone was mocking; “– then you're in trouble. So you might as well trust me the rest of the way.”

Now Maximilian blinked. He seemed to be trying to find a hole in her logic.

“Either trust me, or just Oblivate me,” she said bitterly.

He started. “How did you know I've learned Obliviation?”

“I didn't,” she admitted, surprised. “He really has taught you things, hasn't he?”

He frowned, then nodded slowly. “All right.”

She raised an eyebrow. “All right?”

“I'll tell you. I'll tell you what I'm doing. But on one condition: leave the 'secret agent games' to me. You can moan all you like, but you're not ready to join the Thorn Circle or do Father's bidding. Promise you won't.”

She thought a moment, then nodded. “All right. I promise.”

It was an easy promise to make. She wouldn't do her father's bidding. Whatever she did, she told herself, she was going to do because she wanted to.

Wizards in the New World

Maximilian insisted on waiting until they returned to Charmbridge Academy before he would tell her more.

“That was too easy, back at Blacksburg,” he told her. “They knew who we were. If they didn’t pull us aside for inquisition then, I’ll wager it’s because someone is waiting for us in Chicago.”

As they emerged from 'underhill,' and Lake Michigan appeared out their window, Alexandra wrapped her locket in a small bundle, and tied it to Charlie's leg.

“Stop fussing, Charlie,” she soothed, as Charlie complained, and pecked at the bundle. “It’s not like I’m making you deliver mail.” She ran her fingertips over Charlie's head and neck, and lightly stroked the raven's wings. “Just find me once I get out of the Wizardrail station.”

“I’ve never had a familiar,” Maximilian commented, looking at the raven. “But I must admit, that’s a clever bird.”

“Wicked clever,” Charlie croaked.

“As clever as Hagar, I’ll bet,” Alexandra agreed. She waited until the train was rolling through downtown Chicago, and then opened the window of their compartment. “See you later, Charlie!” She held the bird out the window, and Charlie took off with a loud caw. Minutes later, they pulled into the Chicago Wizardrail station.

After disembarking from the Roanoke Underhill, they passed the row of Portkey booths again. Alexandra saw a wizard in a red Auror's uniform step out of one of them. There was a line formed in front of the booths, though not as long as the line waiting to pass through a squad of Aurors to board the trains. A witch in expensive robes was finally permitted to walk into one of the Portkey booths, and when the door opened again, she was gone.

“If Portkeys can just teleport you cross-country, why did we have to take a train?” Alexandra asked.

"You're using Muggle words again," Maximilian grumbled. "Portkeys are horribly expensive. They're hard to make, and they burn out quickly. There are also other problems with using them." He glanced down at her. "You could ask Lucilla and Drucilla about that, sometime, when you meet them. They're Artificers and they work at a Portkey workshop now, I think."

Alexandra nodded. She really did want to meet her other sisters, too. But she had no time to think about this; no sooner had they passed the lines of waiting passengers than they were greeted by a familiar woman with long black hair, wearing a sharp, business-like pants suit, looking as if she'd wandered into the Wizardrail station from one of the surrounding Muggle office buildings.

"Ms. Grimm," Maximilian greeted her, in a perfectly polite tone.

"What a surprise," Alexandra drawled, in a slightly less polite tone.

Diana Grimm smiled. "Maximilian, Alexandra, how nice to see you again. I hope you had a pleasant vacation?"

"We saw my father," Alexandra told her. "He bought me an expensive robe and said he was sorry for missing my first twelve birthdays. That's it. For the most wanted wizard in the Confederation, he's kind of a deadbeat. He didn't tell us anything about his evil plans to take over the world. So can we go?"

Maximilian was making a strangled sound, but Ms. Grimm looked amused. "Not quite so fast, Miss Quick, but I appreciate your desire to get this out of the way." She gestured, with one hand, for the two teens to precede her. "Shall we?"

Maximilian and Alexandra both sighed, and followed her.

Ms. Grimm made Alexandra wait alone in an empty room with nothing but a table and two chairs, for nearly half an hour. It was just like on a TV cop show, Alexandra thought. Assuming she was being watched, she folded her arms, tapped her foot, and acted impatient and bored,

which was very easy. She wondered if Maximilian was getting the same treatment.

Finally, the Special Inquisitor entered, with two cans of soda. She offered one to Alexandra. "I'm sorry for keeping you waiting," she apologized smoothly. "With all the extra security put in place, as a result of certain occurrences in Roanoke, I find myself doing a dozen things at once lately."

"Uh huh," Alexandra replied, opening the soda can. "You're just trying to sweat me, treating me like a suspect, to see if I break."

Ms. Grimm arched an eyebrow, in an uncanny imitation of her sister. "I think you watch too much Muggle television, Alexandra."

Alexandra sipped the soda. Then she looked down at it, frowning. What if it contained Veritaserum? True, Ms. Grimm had handed her a sealed can, but surely it wouldn't be hard to use magic...

"Worried that I put something in your drink?" Ms. Grimm asked. "You are fond of drama."

"You're the one making me and my brother sit here and answer stupid questions."

"I haven't actually asked any questions yet," Ms. Grimm pointed out, in a dry tone. "But let's get to it, shall we?"

Her questions were straightforward, and while she repeated herself several times, and kept asking for details that Alexandra suspected were intended to trip her up in a lie, the woman appeared to be treating it all as a routine matter, and did not seem particularly suspicious.

Alexandra and Maximilian had already agreed on what they would tell any WJD interrogators. Maximilian had told her to tell the truth, unless she absolutely had to lie.

She admitted to meeting her father in disguise at the Cotillion. The Special Inquisitor took out what looked like a glass picture frame

without a picture, and demanded a description of the wizard whose appearance Abraham Thorn had borrowed. Alexandra complied, and the long-haired blond man's face appeared in the glass, the picture slowly becoming more accurate and lifelike as she added details. Ms. Grimm had an odd expression now, and began questioning Alexandra's description.

"Are you sure this is him?" Grimm demanded, when the picture looked exactly like the man Alexandra had seen.

"Yes!" Alexandra insisted, annoyed.

Ms. Grimm stared at her thoughtfully, then put the frame back into a small satchel she was carrying. Their conversation turned to Alexandra's visit to the Thorn crypt. Here, Alexandra left out only the details of what she'd overheard; she and Maximilian had agreed on their own version of what he and his father had spoken about.

"Do you know anything about the Mors Mortis Society, Alexandra?" Ms. Grimm asked abruptly.

Maximilian had warned her that this might come up, too, and that there was no point lying about it.

"Yes," Alexandra replied. "I'm sure Max already told you that I was invited to join them. I quit after a few meetings because they're all a bunch of creeps." She narrowed her eyes at the Special Inquisitor. "I know you have Max infiltrating them to collect information on the Dark Convention, which is really stupid – first of all, because those losers wouldn't know any real Dark wizards, and second, because you've got no business making a high school student go undercover."

Ms. Grimm looked at her sharply for a few seconds, then nodded.

"We expected Maximilian would tell you something," she said. "I assure you, we won't allow any harm to come to him."

Yeah, right, Alexandra thought.

Ms. Grimm stood up, and said, "I appreciate your cooperation, Miss Quick."

Alexandra thought the interrogation was over, but as she got up, Grimm paused, and asked her, "Where's Charlie?"

Alexandra started; it was the first question that had caught her by surprise.

"I saw how Aurors treated people with 'Dark' familiars in Blacksburg," she replied bitterly. "I wasn't going to let you take Charlie away."

Ms. Grimm gave her a reassuring smile. "We wouldn't have taken your familiar away, Alexandra."

"Well, that's a relief. Good thing I totally trust you. I won't worry about it at all next time, then."

Grimm waved a hand, ignoring the sarcasm. "Your brother should be waiting for you outside. Until next time, Alexandra."

"Yeah, looking forward to it."

She thought she'd been a pretty convincing angry teenage girl.

"Muffliato," Maximilian muttered, with his hand in his pocket, as Alexandra rejoined him outside the Wizardrail station.

"Do you think she bought it?" Alexandra asked, a little nervously.

"Oh, she's suspicious," Maximilian replied. "But yes, I think she bought it. It's not hard to believe that our father is just a remote figure who occasionally appears to remind us that he's still alive and looking out for us."

Alexandra nodded. That wasn't hard to believe at all. "It still seemed... a little easy."

"You'll learn to think like them, Alex," Maximilian said. "And then you'll see how the game is played, by our father, and by the Office of

Special Inquisitions. They could interrogate us more thoroughly, every time, with Legilimency and Veritaserum. They know our father does visit us sometimes, and they're hoping he'll get careless. If he knows we're having every bit of information squeezed out of us after each time we see him, he'll always be cautious. So as long as we play mostly dumb and innocent, but not too dumb and not too innocent –”

Alexandra nodded. She looked up at her brother. “You know about me being the Secret-Keeper for the Thorn Circle, right?”

He nodded grimly. “Father shouldn't have done that.”

She ignored that. “Wouldn't you be protected from Legilimency and Veritaserum, then? If you're one of the Thorn Circle? Unless I give you up...”

“I talked to him about that.” Maximilian's mouth was set in a firm line. “We can't be sure, until it's tested, which hopefully it won't be.” He glanced sideways at her. “But since I wasn't part of the Circle when the Fidelius Charm was cast – Father isn't quite zealous enough to recruit three-year-olds – he doesn't think it will protect me.”

Alexandra frowned. That made sense, she supposed. “But Ms. Grimm made me describe Zachary,” she confessed. “Isn't that going to be a problem for him? I had to reveal his identity.”

Maximilian laughed. “Do you think that was his real name? Or that our father was the only one using Polyjuice Potion that night?”

She blinked. “But –”

He smirked. “Zachary Stanton is the Chief of Roanoke's Auror Authority. The other Aurors probably thought their boss was being quite bold, dancing with you. Now they're wondering how Abraham Thorn managed to literally dance right under their noses, pretending to be him.” Maximilian's eyes gleamed, with a trace of malice. “Considering what happened to the Governor and his men afterwards, I'll wager Mr. Stanton will be looking for a new job soon.”

Alexandra's mouth fell open, and then she shook her head, as they found the Charmbridge bus waiting for them outside the Wizardrail station.

They couldn't talk on the bus – Maximilian was joined by Martin and Pierce and Adelaide. Alexandra wished she had Anna or someone else to talk to, but none of her friends were coming in to Chicago at this time. She saw Janet Jackson and Sonja Rackham, who waved to her nervously from another booth. They didn't invite her to join them, though, so she sat alone amidst the other younger students, while Maximilian and the other Stormcrows sat up front again.

Charlie appeared outside, flapping against her window, and she quickly opened it, over Mrs. Speaks's protests. Other students were staring at her now. She ignored them as she let Charlie in and closed the window.

“Good bird,” she whispered, untying the bundled locket from around Charlie's leg. “Don't worry, you get a treat tonight.”

When they arrived back at Charmbridge, she found that Anna had arrived earlier that day, and was already unpacked.

“I would have sent you a letter, but Jingwei wouldn't have made it to Roanoke and back before school started,” Anna told her, giving Alexandra a hug. “I hope you don't spend the summer there.”

“If I do, we'll just have to figure out how to use telephones,” Alexandra replied. She hadn't actually called anyone from Roanoke, as her cell phone never seemed to work at Croatoa, but she assumed it would if she went to a Muggle town.

The Pritchards were also happy to see her, especially Constance, who seemed relieved to be handing Nigel's cage back over to her. “Nigel's an ornery critter,” she complained. “Hissed like to slay me when I tried to take him out. Had to just toss him his food, and used my wand to clean his cage best I could.”

Alexandra was quite surprised. "Nigel's harmless," she insisted. She reached into the cage, and took out the brown snake. Nigel coiled docilely around her hands, and flicked his tongue at her.

"That's as may be, but I didn't fancy gettin' snakebit none, harmless or not," the Ozarker witch replied, eyeing the snake warily.

Alexandra thanked Constance for taking care of Nigel, and returned to her room.

"Maybe you just don't trust other people," Alexandra said, resting her chin on her hands, as she regarded the snake through the bars of his cage. Nigel was now coiled up around his magically heated rock, and did not seem to be paying her any attention. "I guess I wouldn't blame you."

She was mostly talking to herself, she knew. Nigel couldn't understand her, like Charlie did, and snakes didn't recognize people anyway. But still, she felt a bond with the reptile – the shared memory of writhing helplessly on a cold stone floor, tortured by John Manuelito's wand. And that wasn't something she could have explained to Constance.

Two days passed before Alexandra and Maximilian could do more than whisper to each other in the hallways. She knew that in the final months of school, all the eleventh graders would be preparing for the Junior SPAWN. It was only 'practice' for the final SPAWN every wizarding student needed to take to graduate, but it was taken very seriously by students and teachers alike, more seriously than the end-of-year SPAWNs Alexandra and other underclass students would also be taking.

Maximilian had brought a Wand-Ready [™] SPAWN Study Guide with him when they met in the back of the library, beneath a window currently charmed to look like they were surrounded by an Amazonian rain forest. He swept his wand in a semi-circle and cast his Muffliato spell, then leaned back in his chair with a sigh.

"So when is the next MMS meeting?" Alexandra asked, without preamble.

He frowned at her thoughtfully. "Friday night."

"What are you doing?"

He shook his head. "You don't need to know everything, Alex." His expression was troubled.

She studied him, then sighed. "Fine. Tell me about your mission. Your real mission, and why you're doing our father's bidding."

They heard footsteps, and Maximilian pushed himself forward, setting the front legs of his chair back on the floor. Mrs. Minder walked past, sweeping misplaced books back where they belonged with a wave of her wand. She smiled and nodded to the two students. Alexandra knew the librarian would give Maximilian one of her solemn lectures about proper library behavior if she caught him leaning back in his chair like that. They waited until she was gone, and then Maximilian clasped his hands together in front of him and leaned forward, lowering his voice despite the Muffliato spell he'd already cast.

"Underneath Charmbridge," he whispered, "is a gateway to the Lands Below. I already know where it is. But I haven't figured out how to go through it. John Manuelito knows how, I'm pretty sure. He's the one the Dark Convention has been grooming, more than anyone else in the Mors Mortis Society. He already knows a lot of their secrets."

"Why do you want to go to the Lands Below?" Alexandra asked. "And what are they?"

Maximilian took a deep breath. "America is an old land, Alex. The New World is just as ancient as the Old World, and just as full of secrets. But when European wizards came here, they wanted everything to be just like it was in the Old World. The problem is, back in Europe, wizards had been there for thousands of years. They controlled all the magic. They'd gotten rid of anything that could oppose them, long ago."

"But there were wizards here already."

Maximilian nodded. "The Indians, yes. And other beings as well. The Indians had their own way of coexisting with other magical beings. Our kind has never been very good at coexisting, though."

Alexandra frowned, and waited for him to continue.

"At first, there were wizard wars, between the Colonials and the Indians," Maximilian went on. "We fought just like the Muggles did. They haven't talked much about that in your Wizard Social Studies class, have they?"

Alexandra shook her head. Mrs. Middle's lectures on early wizarding America focused on how wizards had secretly protected Muggle colonists from dangerous magical beasts, and the persecution of witches during the Muggle Panics of the seventeenth century, and the establishment of the first wizarding schools in America, at New Amsterdam and Salem. Indians were barely mentioned at all.

Maximilian nodded. "The Indians didn't use wands. That put them at a disadvantage when it came to fighting us directly. But they had other ways of performing magic, and they could call on the powers that dwell in this land, and at first, the war went badly for us."

"Us?" Alexandra retorted. "I'm not sure I'm not on their side."

"I'm talking about the past, Alex." Maximilian gave her a sardonic smile. "Today, the Confederation is all one big happy family of many cultures. Didn't they tell you that in your Wizard Social Studies class?"

"Yeah," she replied. She remembered David being even more skeptical than her of their cheery lessons on unity and multiculturalism.

"Anyway," Maximilian continued, "the Lands Below are where many of those powers dwell. Beneath the earth, in a sort of other-place where humans normally don't go, there are other races."

"Aren't there places like that in Europe, too?" Alexandra was eager to show off her knowledge. "Like fairy mounds? Or Hades?" She had

read plenty of mythology – until now, she had assumed it was only myth.

“Maybe. If there are, wizards sealed them off long ago.” Maximilian shrugged. “But Indian wizards didn't do that. They could travel through the Lands Below, and treat with the beings who dwell there. When Colonial and Indian wizards battled, Colonials usually won. But they couldn't find all of the Indians' places of power. They couldn't stop the Indians from cursing them, they couldn't capture their wizards, and they couldn't keep the beings who dwelled in the Lands Below from hunting Muggles and wizards alike. It probably took thousands of years for wizards in the Old World to master it. The New World was just as big and just as ancient, and full of enemies using magic Old World wizards didn't understand.”

“Why not just make peace with the Indians, and figure out a way to get along? I mean, shouldn't we share our magic, and then we'd both be better off...” Alexandra's voice trailed off, as Maximilian laughed, without humor.

“When have people ever done that, Alex? Might as well ask why Muggles don't just stop going to war, and why wizards don't just stop practicing Dark Arts.”

She frowned, and held her tongue, waiting for Maximilian to get to the point.

“What I've told you so far,” Maximilian said, “isn't exactly secret, though it's only a few historians who know the details. Most everyone else in the Confederation prefers the happy version we learn in school: that after a few misunderstandings, Colonials and Indians agreed to live apart. The Indians have their own Territories that are governed by the Confederation, but we don't bother them much as long as they don't let anything get loose into our Territories, or endanger the secrecy of the wizarding world.”

“Indians live on reservations in the Muggle world, too,” Alexandra mused. “I don't think they have to stay there, but I guess a lot of them do.”

Maximilian nodded. "That figures. So, what gets left out is that we cut them off at the knees, by sending wizards to the Lands Below, and making a treaty with the beings who dwell there. They gave the Colonials all the places where Indians did their magic, all the places where Indian wizards could come and go between this world and that one, and they let our wizards seal those places. After that, it was easy for the Confederation to take over the land above."

Alexandra shook her head. "Why would these 'powers' make a treaty with the Colonials instead of the Indians? Who are they? What did they – we – give them?"

"That," said Maximilian seriously, "is one of the greatest secrets of the Confederation. And it's what Father wants to find out."

Alexandra looked at her brother, thoughts awhirl. "Okay..." She frowned. "He wants you to go to the Lands Below, and do what? Find out what kind of deal the Confederation made with the people who live there?"

"I doubt they're 'people,' but yes. And tell them that he can offer a better one," Maximilian answered quietly.

Her eyes widened. "How is he going to do that?" she whispered.

Maximilian smiled. "If I knew the answer to that..." His smile faded. "I probably wouldn't like it, and neither would you."

She shook her head. "What does all this have to do with the Dark Convention? And you said there's a gate to the Lands Below under Charmbridge?"

"Charmbridge Academy wasn't built here at random." Her brother looked around, noticing that students were beginning to leave as library closing time approached. "This was probably once one of the Indians' places of power. And there is a passageway here to the Lands Below, one that was sealed like all the others. But there are ways to get through them, despite the Confederation's attempts to close them forever. I just have to find a way." He looked back at his sister. "The Dark Convention knows how, because it's one of the

things they study, that makes them so dangerous in the eyes of the Confederation.”

“I thought our father has allies in the Dark Convention,” she replied in an equally quiet voice. “Why doesn't he just ask them?”

“The Dark Convention isn't like the Confederation, with Governors and Territories and departments.” Maximilian shook his head. “It's a collection of everyone who doesn't like living under the Confederation. That includes crazy Radicalists, Dark wizards, unrecognized Cultures... and a lot of Indians.” He sat up slowly in his chair. “The Mors Mortis Society has existed at Charmbridge Academy for a long time. Father believes certain secrets have been handed down from one generation to the next, by wizards in the Dark Convention who know about that sealed gate. Unfortunately, he's been unsuccessful at finding out who himself. And he can't come here personally – believe me, the Auror Authority would know if Abraham Thorn actually set foot in Charmbridge Academy.”

“And the WJD hasn't arrested John yet because...?”

Maximilian smiled thinly. “I think I've almost convinced them that the MMS is entirely made up of posers, with no real connection to the Dark Convention. Either that, or I've convinced them that I don't have a future in undercover work.” He shrugged. “They never told me about the gate to the Lands Below, of course. I think what they really want to know is whether the Dark Convention has a way of opening it.”

Alexandra leaned back, and folded her arms. She stared at the table in front of her, thinking, for a long time, until the lights dimmed, and they heard Mrs. Minder's voice throughout the library, announcing that it was time for all students to leave the premises. Then she looked up at Maximilian.

“This sounds crazy, stupid, and dangerous,” she declared. “There's like a dozen different bad things that could happen to you, and you don't have any idea what you're going to do, do you? Why are you doing this, Max?”

He stared at her grimly. "Because my name is Thorn. One way or the other, I will make that name one that I and all my sisters can bear without shame. If I fail Father, maybe I'll succeed at what the WJD wants. But if I accomplish what Father wants, we may have the key to undoing the Confederation."

"And you're so sure that what our father wants will be better than the Confederation?"

"Better for our family. Probably better for a lot of families. Certainly better for the Indians and a lot of other Cultures who are just barely tolerated."

None of this was clear to Alexandra. But she didn't want her brother to tell her she just didn't understand. She had too much to think about.

"We'd better go," he mouthed, as he saw Mrs. Minder coming towards them with a stern expression.

She nodded, and the two of them rose from their table, pushed their chairs in, and nodded politely to the librarian as they exited the library.

In the hallway outside, Maximilian looked down at her, with an expression of weariness tinged with relief. "Now I've told you everything," he said softly. "Everything I know. I swear."

"Okay," she replied. "I believe you."

He smiled, and put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed it. "Good night, Alexandra." And he leaned forward and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, before walking off to the junior boys' dorms.

Alexandra stood in the hallway, watching him go, thinking about the burden their father had put on her brother's shoulders, and how Abraham Thorn had persuaded his sixteen-year-old son to join a cause he probably didn't really understand much better than she did.

And she was also thinking about how she could help him. Because she knew something Maximilian didn't. She knew how to get to the Lands Below.

By the Magic on Your Kind

Alexandra spent hardly any time with her friends over the next week. When not doing her homework, she was in the library, reading everything she could find about Indians, and Indian magic, and magical beings. She had no better luck than before finding books about the Lands Below that weren't restricted, and she knew better than to try to ask Bran and Poe again for help acquiring those. She did find a great deal of information about Muggle Indian tribes, but somewhat less about what distinguished Indian magic from 'wizard magic.' According to nearly every book in the library, 'wizard magic' was proper magic performed with a wand. Indian magic fell into the category of 'non-standard magical practices'; grudgingly permitted by the Confederation under Cultural Practices Exemptions, but not taught in any official wizarding school curriculum. It was, according to their approved texts, primitive, unreliable, and based on an imperfect understanding of magical theory; it only crudely imitated spells that could be cast much more effectively with a wand, and was often dangerous. Some books implied that there was little separating Indian magic from Dark Arts except overly permissive Wizards' Congresses.

Not actually interested in performing Indian magic, Alexandra cared less about biased descriptions of 'savage Red Muggles and heathen hedge-wizards' than she did about the magical beings that America's early Colonial wizards considered most dangerous. There were tales of Wendigos, Sasquatches, Thunderbirds, Piasas, Okaluckees, Horned Serpents, Underwater Panthers, Great Skunk Apes, and other fantastic beasts, but the only creatures one might make treaties with seemed to be the 'Little People' found in the legends of every Indian tribe. From their description and their powers, they sounded to Alexandra an awful lot like goblins, or perhaps elves... but decidedly unhelpful elves.

This led her to the topic of house-elves and how they came to serve wizards; unsurprisingly, she found that Charmbridge's library books mostly contained prettified tales of an ancient, mutually beneficial relationship. But some of the older books made less of an effort to hide the fact that it was binding magic responsible for that relationship – and the binding was on the elves. From there, her interest turned to books about magical vows and binding oaths.

Anna nagged Alexandra to study for the SPAWN with her. They were well into April now, with the end of the semester less than two months away. To Alexandra, that was a long ways off; to Anna, it was right around the corner.

Anna seemed concerned by Alexandra's preoccupation with studying things that weren't on their SPAWN, but a sudden fascination with early Confederation history and elves seemed harmless enough. It wasn't as if Alexandra were researching the Thorn Circle or anything Dark Arts-related. But Alexandra knew Anna was suspicious. Anna always knew when her roommate was up to something.

Maximilian looked particularly haggard that weekend, following his Friday night Mors Mortis Society meeting. Darla was also looking increasingly drawn and pale. Alexandra tried not to speculate about what sorts of things they might be doing. Darla's eyes narrowed every time they crossed paths, but Alexandra continued to give her a cold, hard look in return, and Anna and Angelique were the ones who winced as their friends passed each other in the hallways.

"Darla hain't lookin' well nowadays," Constance remarked one morning at breakfast, and then she and Forbearance exchanged glances with Anna as the temperature around Alexandra almost perceptibly dropped. Alexandra was worried about her brother, and she refused to feel sympathy for Darla.

They didn't meet that weekend for flying lessons or wizard-dueling, or the next. When he finally sat down with her, Alexandra showed her brother what she had learned in the library.

He nodded when she brought up the Little People. "If they aren't the powers who rule the Lands Below, they're probably intermediaries," he said. "Father has suggested that they may serve the true masters of those lands, as house-elves serve us."

Alexandra wondered why he hadn't mentioned this before, but Maximilian told her she was being very helpful, and asked her to continue her research.

Encouraged, she read more about the Confederation, and asked more pointed questions in Mrs. Middle's Wizard Social Studies class. Mrs. Middle became increasingly flustered at Alexandra's questions about the Confederation's laws and cultures, especially when she began asking about things like Obliviation, and censuses that still recorded blood status, and Cultural Practices Exemptions that allowed some 'non-standard practices' but labeled others Dark Arts.

David was pleased at the direction of her inquiries. "You ought to be coming to ASPEW meetings," he urged her. "We talk about more than just house-elf rights, you know."

ASPEW, Alexandra thought, probably didn't go far enough. Yet she still didn't quite see why the Confederation was so terrible that her father wanted to do away with it altogether.

This left her with more questions than ever before, and she took to wearing her locket again, in the hopes of making contact with her father. A week after her conversation with Maximilian about the Little People, she was rewarded, as she sat by herself in the library, doing Alchemy homework.

Alexandra.

She started, and then realized where the 'voice' had come from. She looked around quickly, then closed her hand around the locket, hanging from her neck.

"Bout time," she muttered. "It would be a lot easier if the wizarding world used cell phones, you know."

She sensed her father chuckling, and then he responded: I am trying, my dear.

"You know Max and I got interrogated after we left Roanoke?" she said under her breath. "Did cursing the Governor make you feel better?"

I felt a certain satisfaction, he admitted. And I am sure Diana Grimm was mindful of the consequences of harming my children as well.

“Wonderful,” she mumbled. “Have you talked to Max lately?”

There was a pause, then her father answered: Maximilian and I are in communication, yes.

“So you know he still hasn't found a way to the Lands Below.” And before her father could reply, she hissed, “How dare you try to send him there?”

The pause was much longer this time, and when her father responded, his mental voice was a little sharper. Maximilian is nearly a grown man, and he knows what he is doing.

“Does he? He can't explain to me why it's worth risking his life to help you destroy the Confederation. Can you?”

If you want an explanation, yes, I could explain at length. But –

“Not here, not now, right?” she whispered. “Sounds familiar.”

Must you try my patience every time I want to talk to my daughter?

“Is this mission of Max's worth risking my life, too?”

There was an even longer silence.

Alexandra waved half-heartedly to Stuart as he walked past, worried that he might choose to come over and talk to her. Torvald's grandmother had just passed away, and with his best friend absent from school for a few days, Stuart had been spending more time in the library. But he just nodded to her, and retreated into the Wizard Journals section.

Then she worried that her father had 'disconnected,' but finally he replied: You are contemplating getting involved.

She couldn't tell whether he sounded pleased or not.

“I can help him,” she whispered.

How?

“By going with him.”

She waited.

I know how eager you are to prove yourself, my dear. And I know how talented you are. But you are too young, and not yet knowledgeable enough.

“I know how he can get to the Lands Below. But he's not going without me. So tell me, are you willing to send both of us?”

She sensed something through the locket – not so much anger, but a tingle of excitement, and something like frustration as well. She suspected her father was finding his troublesome daughter vexing indeed.

Talk to Maximilian, Alexandra. Tell him what you know. Please let him confer with me about this.

“So the two of you can decide for me? I don't think so. I just want to know if this is something you'd risk both of us for.”

Maximilian will not agree to your joining him.

“Do you think he can stop me?”

Her father's pause this time was briefer. I think he will try.

“I want a promise from you,” she said, speaking a little more loudly now, after once again looking around to make sure no one was nearby. “If we succeed, then you owe me a boon.”

A boon? He sounded surprised.

“A real, magical boon, sworn to by oath. So that I know you're really serious. Maybe I'll ask you to tell me how you really met Mom, or maybe I'll ask for a winged pony. Or maybe I'll ask you to turn

yourself in to the Auror Authority.” Her teeth were clenched together now. “You think I don't understand how serious this is? I may not be into politics, but I know how serious you are about what you're trying to do. Swear an oath, and then I know you trust me and you're taking me seriously. Or else you and Maximilian can do this without me, and don't bother ever asking me to trust you again!”

She was glad she wasn't actually facing her father. She could feel something crackling across the space between them, making her hand tingle until it was numb. The sensation spread from the locket through her hand and into her body, sending chills and pinprick sensations through her, and she knew Abraham Thorn had probably never had anyone make a demand like this of him – certainly not a thirteen-year-old daughter. But she remained sitting motionless where she was, and didn't let go of the locket.

At last, her father's thoughts came back to her.

I so swear. Do this thing, enable Maximilian to go to the Lands Below, and I will grant you anything it is within my power to grant.

She released her grip on the locket, and relaxed a little in her chair. Her entire body was tingling, and she heard one last fading thought from her father: This was no small thing, Alexandra. Be mindful of the things you ask.

She knew the next morning that her father had been in contact with Maximilian after their conversation. Her brother was staring at her all during morning exercises, and he grabbed her as soon as the JROC students were released to change for breakfast.

“I need to talk to you,” he grated. His fingers were clamped around her arm, but he seemed to be very carefully holding her in a tight but non-bruising grip.

“Do you mind if I take a shower first?” she replied, wrinkling her nose. “You could use one, too.” They were both sweaty after climbing magic ropes suspended in the air all morning.

Maximilian shook his head. “I'm serious, Alexandra!”

“So am I. You stink. And if I don't get back to my room quickly, I'll have to hex Darla to get her out of the shower.”

His eyes blazed, and she felt his hand tightening around her arm. “Stop being a precious little brat!” he hissed.

“You stop being a big snarly jerk. You know we can't talk until later. You're upset, I get it. Now let go of me, and we'll talk after drills this afternoon.” Alexandra was the one being cool and rational now, and Maximilian blinked and looked a bit disconcerted. He let go of her, and she gave him a half-smile, and sauntered off to her room.

Despite feeling rather pleased with herself, she wasn't looking forward to their confrontation that afternoon. She knew he was going to be stewing about it all day. Indeed, he was eyeing her with cold fury that afternoon, as they went through what turned out to be one of their better drills, with Alexandra being the day's 'Flight Leader' of the new wands, and taking the other junior JROC students through a near-perfect five-by-five broom formation.

She expected Colonel Shirliffe to dismiss them immediately afterwards, but instead, as everyone stood at attention, she barked, “King, Quick, front and center!”

Alexandra almost looked at her brother, to see if he had any idea what this was about – she was pretty sure neither of them had done anything wrong. But she kept her eyes straight ahead as she stepped stiffly out of formation and walked in step with Maximilian, to stand before the uniformed teacher.

Colonel Shirliffe looked the two of them over, and said, “You're both out of uniform.”

Alexandra blinked, and started to open her mouth to protest. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Beatrice wink at her. What was going on?

Shirtliffe held up two small boxes. “Mage-Corporal King, I trust that your lapse in judgment and leadership responsibilities earlier this year was a one-time fluke, not to be repeated?”

“Yes, ma'am,” Maximilian replied, still looking straight ahead.

Shirtliffe next looked at Alexandra. “And you, Miss Quick – you were an unwilling draftee, and yet here you are, still with us by choice. And quite to my surprise as much as yours, I suspect, you are the best new wand this year.”

Alexandra did know she was better than the other new wands, at least as far as brooming and wand-work went, but she had never expected Ms. Shirtliffe to commend her for it. “Er, thank you, ma'am.”

Shirtliffe opened the two boxes. “I'm pleased to announce that this will be the first time I've conducted a brother-and-sister promotion ceremony.”

Alexandra suppressed a grin. Maximilian was getting his lost stripe back! And new wands usually didn't get promoted until they'd been in the JROC for a full year.

They kept their eyes locked straight ahead as Shirtliffe announced: “By the authority vested in me as Witch-Colonel in the Central Territory Regiment, and commanding officer of Charmbridge Academy's Junior Regimental Officer Corps, I hereby promote Maximilian Alexander King to the rank of Mage-Sergeant, and Alexandra Octavia Quick to the rank of Witch-Private.”

Everyone remained standing stiffly at attention, until Shirtliffe commanded, “At ease!” Behind them, the rest of Charmbridge's JROC, along with Maximilian's fellow Stormcrows, applauded and cheered.

“Traditionally, a promotee is allowed to select someone other than his or her commanding officer to pin a new rank on.” Shirtliffe held up the small gold insignia that went on their collars. Her eyes twinkled, as she asked, “Do either of you have anyone you'd like to select for that honor?”

Slowly, Maximilian and Alexandra turned their heads, to look at one another. Alexandra swallowed uncomfortably, thinking about their argument that morning, and the sullen looks her brother had been giving her all day. She tried to look impassive, but there was something half-hopeful, half-pleading, in her eyes. Please don't be mad at me, she thought.

Maximilian stared at her a moment, his own face completely expressionless, and then he answered Shirliffe: "I'd like my sister to pin my rank on, if she's willing."

"Of course I am." Alexandra smiled. "I'd like my brother to do the same." He nodded.

She was surprised, herself, at how proud she felt as she pinned her brother's new rank to his collar, and again, as she stood at attention while he pinned her new chevrons to hers. Then they looked at each other, words passing silently between them while their fellow mages clapped and cheered again.

They got rid of Beatrice and Martin afterwards only by telling them they needed to return to the JROC Headquarters classroom, so Maximilian could show Alexandra how to add a chevron to her sleeves. They marched through Charmbridge's hallways without speaking, until they reached the old classroom where extra uniforms and boots and ceremonial swords were stored. Maximilian closed the door once they were inside, cast a spell to seal the room against eavesdroppers, and then turned around to face Alexandra, with a sigh.

"Congratulations," she said.

He regarded her silently for a moment, then nodded. "You, too."

She folded her arms, and they looked at each other without speaking for almost a full minute.

"Father says you claim you have a way of entering the Lands Below," he said at last.

She nodded.

“Now, how in Merlin's name would you have found a way to do that, when I couldn't? Seeing as how you're no longer having any dealings with John Manuelito or the rest of the Mors Mortis Society – are you?” The last two words were growled, more a threat than a question, as he stepped closer to her.

She stood her ground. “I didn't lie,” she told him quietly. “I have a way. Take me to the gate, and I can show you how to go through. I wouldn't have told our father something like that as a joke.”

He was toe to toe with her now, looking down at her, and he shook his head. “How?”

“I'll tell you,” she said, “if I can go with you.”

“NO!” he roared, and she stepped back before he could seize her, and she drew her wand and pointed it at him.

“Stop losing your temper, stop trying to bully me every time you can't get me to do what you want!”

He eyed her wand, and growled, “Are you out of your mind?” His own hand was twitching, as if it was an effort for him not to draw his own wand.

“No.” She shook her head. “I'm just getting your attention. You always do that. Wonder where you got that temper.” She raised an eyebrow. As he glared at her, she put her wand back on its cord. “Do you grab Julia like that and yell at her?”

“She isn't nearly as vexing!” he snapped. “She doesn't keep trying to put herself in danger.”

“In case you haven't noticed, I'm not Julia. And I'm going with you, to the Lands Below. I know I'm not as good at magic as you, Max, but I'm still pretty good, and you're not as good as our father, who should be the one going. So we're doing this together or not at all.”

He shook his head. "No, no, no," he groaned, as if trying to shake the thought out of his head. He stepped towards her again, hands open. "Alexandra... don't do this —"

"I'm not changing my mind." She stared up at him, chin jutting out defiantly.

"Tell. Me. How," he growled, through clenched teeth. "You will tell me!"

"Or what?" she asked quietly. "You'll Crucio it out of me?"

He stared at her, and then his shoulders sagged, as he slumped into the nearest chair. "No. Of course not." He ran a hand over his face.

She looked at him, and bit her lip, then slid up next to him and laid her arms around his neck. She pressed her cheek against his. She could feel a tiny bit of stubble on his skin; not enough to really be visible, just enough to scratch a little.

"You're reckless and bold, too," she said softly. "But if I'm with you, you have to be careful, and you have to come back."

He groaned. "You're just a girl, Alex. You're thirteen." It sounded like a plea.

She bit back her first angry retort, and asked instead, "How old were you when you first decided to help Father?"

He answered that with silence. She continued leaning against him, with her arms around his neck. Finally, he spoke. "You know that once we do this, you can't change your mind and say you don't want to be involved with Father's schemes any more? Because he can't allow the WJD or anyone else to know what we've done. You'll have to take all the precautions the other members of the Thorn Circle do. You know what happens to those who decide to leave."

She nodded, remembering Ben Journey.

He sat there a moment longer, and then patted her on the shoulder and gently pushed her away as he stood up.

“You're sure you can get through,” he asked. “Once we're at the gate?”

She nodded again.

“We need to prepare.” Maximilian paced back and forth. “It's hard to say just how long we could be down there, so we'll need extra clothes, a tent, food, potions – I have most of those things already packed, but not for two people. You'll need to put together your own changes of clothing, and anything else you think you need to bring with you. It will fit in the wizard-pack I have.”

“I want to take Charlie with me.”

He glanced at her, then shrugged, a bit helplessly. “Sure, why not? You could be going to your death, might as well take your familiar with you.”

She glared at him. “Charlie is smart, and more helpful than anything except maybe a wand.”

“Probably more helpful than a troublesome little sister,” he commented. Ignoring her scathing look, he continued. “We'll take our brooms also.”

“When are we going?” she asked.

He turned around, and studied her a moment.

“At the end of May,” he replied. “That gives us about a month to train.”

“Train?”

He nodded. “I hope you weren't planning on spending much time in the rec room, playing games with your friends. You may be talented, Witch-Private Quick, but we have only a few weeks before we go

where no wizard in his right mind goes. I can't teach you everything Father has taught me in that time, but I hope I can teach you enough. And if I don't make you cry, I've been too easy on you."

"You're not going to make me cry."

He showed teeth. "We'll see." He walked to the door. "Lessons start tomorrow evening. And by the way, you still have to do your homework and study for your SPAWN. Just in case we come back alive."

"Are you sure Max isn't beating you up?" Anna eyed her doubtfully, as Alexandra crawled out of bed. She was exhausted, and sore, as she had been nearly every night for weeks. The only respite came on evenings when Maximilian had unavoidable JROC duties, or needed to spend some time with his friends, which he still had to do occasionally for the sake of appearances, or on nights when the Mors Mortis Society met. Then, Alexandra tried to catch up on her homework, when she wasn't reading about elves and Indians.

The nights Maximilian wasn't otherwise engaged, he drilled her in hexes and curses and protective spells that weren't taught in school, made her memorize potions from his kit that were illegal for minors to possess, and pushed her as hard as he could, in one-on-one wizard duels that made their sessions with Beatrice and Martin seem gentle. He dropped her on her head, blinded her, blistered her hands, peeled skin off her face with scouring hexes, even lit the ends of her hair on fire, and made her vomit jellyfish. When she complained that he was just being sadistic, he spun her like a top and then continued pelting her with little fireballs while she staggered about dizzily, until she actually succeeded in deflecting one.

She was awed by his skill, and dreamed of being half as good as him, but she had to admit to herself, each time she crawled into bed, after he patched her up with healing spells and potions, that she wasn't sure she'd have committed to this if she had it to do over again. She knew that he was just trying to make her give up and let him go to the Lands Below without her. He was hurting her as much as he could without leaving marks that couldn't be concealed, and waiting for her to say, "Enough."

Healing magic notwithstanding, the abuse was taking a toll, and she could see it in the mirror. So could Anna.

"Max is teaching me as much dueling magic as he can," Alexandra explained to her roommate, finding that the same policy she used with Ms. Grimm also worked with her friends: stick as close to the truth as possible. "He's only going to be here until the end of the school year, and then I'll probably only see him when I can visit Roanoke, and who knows how often that will be?"

"Why do you want to learn dueling magic so badly?" Anna demanded. "You'd think that's all magic is good for – hexing and cursing people."

Alexandra smiled, and patted Anna on the shoulder as she shuffled into the bathroom. "Sometimes it's fun," she admitted. Anna shook her head, watching her friend with a concerned look.

The end of May was approaching. Alexandra started to feel as if everyone was watching her. Ms. Shirtliffe asked her several times if she was getting enough sleep, Constance and Forbearance and David were all echoing Anna's concerns, and on one occasion, Alexandra passed Ms. Grimm in the hallway and noticed the Dean watching her thoughtfully.

It was Darla's scrutiny that worried her the most, though. Darla and Alexandra still didn't speak to each other, and an icy chill still passed between them whenever they saw each other, in their shared bathroom, in the hallways, and in class. Alexandra could sense Darla watching her, as if trying to work out what she was up to.

"Maybe you have a guilty conscience," Maximilian suggested one evening, after she told him about Darla's strange behavior. Alexandra looked at him in alarm, worried that he might suspect she had Darla's obol. If he did, she knew he'd try to take it from her, though she was pretty sure he didn't have the missing piece of the puzzle, the means of using it to get to the Lands Below: the Charmbridge elves.

It was an inopportune time for her to be thinking about secrets she was keeping from Maximilian; having decided that she needed time to

rest and recover before they actually embarked on their journey, he had discontinued dueling in the final week of May. Instead, he was trying to teach her the bare basics of Occlumency.

Their father was a skilled Legilimens and Occlumens, he informed her, but both arts were exceedingly difficult to learn. Maximilian had only learned a little bit of Occlumency, and his ability at Legilimency was rudimentary at best.

“You aren't going to be able to keep a Legilimens out of your mind if he's really pushing,” Maximilian told her. “At best, I can keep from thinking about something I really don't want to be thinking about, for a few seconds. So if you know someone is looking at your thoughts, you can make yourself think about something else.”

Trying not to think about something, Alexandra found, was almost impossible, and it made her head hurt. “Are we going to need Occlumency when we meet the Little People in the Lands Below?” she demanded.

“Probably not,” Maximilian replied. “But we may need it when we meet Ms. Grimm afterwards.”

Alexandra tried, but she thought these lessons were a waste of time. She didn't complain too much, though, as the alternative was vomiting jellyfish again.

They planned their descent to Charmbridge's lowest basement and then to the Lands Below on the last weekend in May. If they left Friday night, Maximilian reasoned, then there was a chance they'd be back before the school staff noticed they were gone.

But that required persuading Anna not to report her missing.

“I need you to do me a favor,” Alexandra said to her roommate, as they were getting ready for bed one evening.

Anna's eyebrows went up. “Okay,” she answered cautiously.

Alexandra smiled, and put her hands on Anna's shoulders, while telling her the well-rehearsed story she and Maximilian had settled upon.

"Max and I are leaving school grounds, and going to see our father this weekend," she whispered.

Anna gulped, and turned pale.

"I know you don't think I should. But... I have to do this, Anna." She hoped her earnest expression was convincing, as lying to Anna had always been more difficult than lying to anyone else. "It'll be all right. It just means we won't be here after curfew, and I need you to cover for me. And if anyone asks where I am..."

"Tell them you're in the library, or you're sick in bed, or make up some other lie?" Anna's expression made it clear what she thought of being asked to lie on Alexandra's behalf.

"I'll tell our friends the truth when I get back," Alexandra promised, knowing that was also untrue. "You know I can't tell too many people beforehand, or there's just no way it will stay a secret. But I know I can trust you, Anna."

She hated herself a little, when Anna chewed her lip and then nodded reluctantly.

That Friday night, Alexandra had packed three changes of clothes, hoping they weren't actually going to be down there that long, and given the resulting bundle to Maximilian, for him to add to his kit. He had packed all sorts of things besides food, clothing, and camping equipment: potions, Gillyweed, Flaming Dungbombs, Bubotuber Balloons, Homing Stars, Skyhooks, a Danger Alarm, a Lost Traveler's Compass, and a dozen other magic items Alexandra resolved to put on her Christmas list (though most of them were forbidden at school, and some were illegal).

She moved silently in the darkness of her room. Anna was sound asleep, and Alexandra had cast a Silencing Charm around her roommate to make sure she didn't wake up. She pulled on the 'lucky

socks' Constance and Forbearance had given her, and then her Mud-Repelling Boots. She put on her bracelet, with the snake and raven charms that had been gifts from Anna, and lastly, she put the locket that had been a gift from her father around her neck. She paused, then, but felt no thoughts coming through the locket. She wrapped her JROC all-weather cloak around her shoulders, though they had no idea whether there would be any 'weather' in the Lands Below. The last thing she picked up was her broom.

Finally, she leaned over Anna's bed, and gave her roommate a kiss on the cheek. Anna murmured softly and turned over in her sleep.

"Come on, Charlie." Alexandra beckoned, and Charlie cooed and fluttered to her shoulder. With only her familiar, her 2009 Valkyrie, and the clothes on her back, she exited her room.

The warlock in the painting watching Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall was awake, for once. He'd actually been more vigilant, during the past semester, and Alexandra had to Freeze-Frame him to get to the stairs. She reached the first basement, and found Maximilian waiting for her, with a backpack that looked much too small for all the things he was supposed to be carrying. They nodded to each other, but said nothing, knowing that Charmbridge's elves might hear them. Maximilian preceded Alexandra down the stairs to the next level, and then to the level below that, where the corridors were carved through rock, and where long ago, if what Maximilian said was true, Indian wizards had gathered underground and performed magic.

"You know I'm going to try one more time to talk some sense into your thick, stubborn head," he lectured her, as they lit their wands and walked forward into the darkness. "You're a trial and a pain, and you'll be a hindrance in the Lands Below, a burden slowing me down, endangering us both."

"Thanks," she replied dryly. His words stung, as he'd known they would, but she wasn't going to let him talk her out of this, not now.

"You really think you're going to be helpful?"

"Just give me a chance, Max," she pleaded.

"The only reason I'm giving you a chance is because you've forced me to, and so help me, if you can't take us through that gate..."

"Then let me do it, and stop trying to change my mind."

"Listen to me, you troublesome little..."

"Yeah, this is a really good time to start a fight."

Maximilian shook his head angrily. Alexandra looked around, but she had only been down here a few times, and not in months – she didn't see the room where the Mors Mortis Society had met to summon the spirit, and where she had been Crucioed, and it felt as if they were walking further than before.

The corridor was definitely sloping downwards, and it was beginning to look less like a man-made passageway and more like a natural tunnel, really just an elongated cave.

"All this down here, and they just sealed it and built a school on top of it?" she muttered.

"Practically all wizarding schools were built on locations the Indians once used," Maximilian explained. "Salem, New Amsterdam, Baleswood, Blacksburg, even Sedona. And every Gringotts location in the Confederation as well. The goblins know their magic, and they might have problems with wizards themselves, but they're still of the Old World, too."

Maximilian held his wand up, as the tunnel they were in widened, and Alexandra saw that they were now in a large, oval cavern. It did not look as if it had been carved by human hands; at the same time, it was just a little too regular in shape, and devoid of significant outcroppings, pits, or contusions along its inner walls, to be wholly natural. The floor was hard clay, and of a color unlike the dirt she'd seen outside, or down in the river valley beneath the Invisible Bridge.

She felt something here. She instinctively wanted to back away from the clay floor, as if she were standing on a precipice. Her stomach

was fluttering. All she saw was solid earth, but her instincts told her that there was a deep, yawning abyss before her. Charlie fussed and fluttered uneasily on her shoulder.

"This is it," Maximilian told her. "This is the gate to the Lands Below." His dark eyes glittered in the light cast by their wands, as he regarded her solemnly. "Now... show me."

She nodded, and reached into her pocket, and took out the obol. Maximilian's eyes widened.

"You stole Darla's obol!" he exclaimed, stunned.

"Actually, Charlie did." She was unsurprised, and did not resist, when he reached out and snatched it from her hand. Nor was she surprised when he pointed his wand at her.

"Before you cast a Body-Bind Charm," she warned, "do you know how to use it?"

He hesitated, and looked at the metal disk in his hand.

"Just holding it isn't enough." She folded her arms and looked at her brother smugly.

Then Charlie cawed in alarm as someone said, "Accio obol!" The coin flew from Maximilian's fingers and spun through the darkness. As he and Alexandra both turned and raised their wands, they saw Darla Dearborn, in the tunnel behind them, reach out to try to snatch the obol out of the air, but John Manuelito reached over her head and grabbed it first.

"I told you!" Darla screeched. "I told you! Give me that!" She grabbed at John's hand, but he closed his fist around the coin, and stared at Alexandra and Maximilian contemptuously.

"Well, Darla was right about Quick, and I was right about you." He smiled coldly at Maximilian.

“Protego!” Maximilian shouted, just before John's wand came up and expelled a flurry of black darts that filled the tunnel, hissing when they struck stone, and melting into blue-black smoke against Maximilian's shield. They continued zinging about the tunnel, but Alexandra and Maximilian were untouched. John snarled and cast a crackling white ball of lightning that exploded against the shield. Maximilian stepped back and grimaced, while Alexandra threw her cloak over Charlie, holding the raven under her arm as she cast a Shield Charm of her own.

Her brother dispelled his protective barrier, and his next hex collided with John's curse in mid-air. Burning droplets of green acid spattered in all directions; some went over Alexandra's shield, and rained down on her, stinging her neck and burning little holes through her cloak. She turned her back to shield Charlie with her body, then spun around again and cried, “Expelliarmus!”

John countered her spell, and flung something that flapped and giggled obscenely as it flew at them. Maximilian made it explode into sickly greenish-yellow flames with a slash of his wand, and Alexandra shouted, “Defodio!” as Darla pointed her wand. The ceiling over Darla's head exploded, and the other girl screamed and dived to the ground, covering her head as rocks fell on her.

John chanted something in an unfamiliar tongue, and stone hands reached from the ground and grabbed at his adversaries' feet. Alexandra winced as a hand seized her ankle, and she blasted it with another Gouging Spell. It shattered, but two more grabbed her feet in its place.

Maximilian ignored the stone hands, and flicked his wand repeatedly at the older boy, firing a volley of spells that John deflected at first, until the last one dropped like a curve ball and caught him right in the groin. He grunted in surprise, and even as his knees buckled, Maximilian said, “Levicorpus!” John flipped upside down, and before he could cast a counterspell, Maximilian swung him back and forth, slamming him against either side of the tunnel, and then dropped him straight down on his head. The senior struck the stone floor of the tunnel with a dull thud, and then his feet, still sticking up in the air, toppled over and he collapsed.

Maximilian winced, and began disintegrating the stone hands. Alexandra had already blasted all the ones around her into pieces. She saw one hand had the toe of Maximilian's boot clenched between its fingers in a way that would only be possible if it had crushed the toes inside.

Charlie squawked in alarm again. Darla, lying on the ground, pointed her wand at Maximilian, and stammered, "Cruc...Crucio..."

"Levicorpus!" Alexandra shouted, and Darla was jerked into the air, feet above her head. She screamed as Alexandra pelted her viciously with hexes, again and again, until Maximilian yelled, "Stop it, Alex! She's out."

Alexandra lowered her wand, her arm shaking a little. Darla was unconscious; her arms dangled straight down, her wand had fallen to the ground, and her robe hung around her in burned, tattered shreds. She was bruised and battered from head to toe. Alexandra stared at the girl for a moment, then growled, "Liberacorpus!" and let her fall to the tunnel floor next to John.

Maximilian eyed her as he grimaced and pulled one boot off. "Anything broken?" he asked. His foot was a bloody mess.

Alexandra let go of Charlie, who fluttered to the ground and sat there, making nervous clicking sounds. She wiggled her own toes. The stone hands didn't seem to have seized her as tightly as they'd grabbed Maximilian. "I don't think so. Are you going to be all right? You can't heal that instantly."

"No." He smiled unpleasantly. "But I won't be the one who needs to heal. This will be my way of thanking Manuelito for all his... teaching." He held his wand over his mangled toes, and Alexandra recognized the widdershins gesture he used, and the incantation, as the Wound Relocating Charm. "I'm not sure how we'll get back, though. I'm sure those two will have the entire Mors Mortis Society waiting for us. You need to stay, Alex. Report this to the Dean, so I don't get ambushed when I return."

“Nice try.” Alexandra walked over to their unconscious attackers, and knelt next to John. She plucked the obol out of his clenched hand. She stood up again and walked back to her brother. “You had a plan, you and Dad, for you to return without being caught. And you knew you could get interrogated by the Inquisitors when you return, too, so you had a plan for that. But you weren't planning on me being part of it. You figured I'd show you how to get through the gate, and then you'd use a Petrification Charm on me and leave me behind. Asshole!”

Maximilian regarded her silently, flinching slightly when she swore at him.

“Did you think I wouldn't expect that?” she demanded. “Teaching me Occlumency was just to make me think you were actually preparing me – like I'd really be able to use it to stop someone from using Legilimency on me, after one week of practice? How stupid do you think I am?” Her voice rose, and her tone became more sarcastic. “Oh, let's beat up Alexandra for a month so she'll think I'm actually training her, and maybe she'll cry and give up!”

Maximilian sighed. “Yes, you're very clever. I really was training you, you know.” He smiled grimly. “I thought you might actually need it.”

“Well, I will.” She held out the obol. “Because I am going with you.”

He didn't say anything. She lowered the coin, then knelt on the ground in front of him, with her hands on her knees.

“I know it's dangerous,” she murmured, looking into his eyes. “I know.”

Her brother remained silent for several moments. She gazed at him steadily. At last, he spoke.

“When we're down there, you obey me. Don't argue or get in a snit because you don't like being bossed. I can't trust you unless I know you're going to do what you're told, even if you don't like it or think it's stupid. Just like in the JROC.”

She smiled. "Yes, Mage-Sergeant."

He closed his eyes for a moment. "So how do we pass through the gate?"

She stood up. She looked down at Charlie and gestured imperiously. The raven squawked and fluttered back to her shoulder. Then Alexandra closed her eyes and concentrated.

The binding magic for elves wasn't like wand-magic, and there weren't any formal spells to invoke it. It was a matter of understanding, and magical intent. She was less certain than she'd pretended, since she had never actually done this. She only knew how it worked in theory. It wasn't exactly something she could practice at Charmbridge.

It was going to be horribly embarrassing if it didn't work, she thought, and then she recited the words she'd composed in the library, surrounded by books that she hoped Bran and Poe would never catch her reading:

"By the magic on your kind,
spells that hold you, oaths that bind;
hear my summons, where'er you be:
Em, I summon you to me!"

With a crack, Em suddenly appeared before her, looking startled. Maximilian's jaw dropped.

"You summoned me!" Em exclaimed, looking at Alexandra angrily. "How did Miss do that?"

"I'm sorry, Em," Alexandra apologized.

The old house-elf realized where she was, and her eyes went wide. "What – what are you children doing here? Get out! Get out now!"

"There are some students who've been doing Dark Arts down here. You need to tell Dean Grimm about them." Alexandra pointed at John

and Darla. "And those two probably need to go to the infirmary," she added.

Em stared at the two unconscious students, and then back at Alexandra. "Yes, Em will tell the Dean, but you two must get out of here—" Her voice caught in her throat, and her eyes bulged in horror, as Alexandra held up the obol.

"I'm really, really sorry, Em," Alexandra sighed, and then spoke again, before Em could interrupt her. "By the ancient compact, I offer you this obol as payment, and I command you to take my brother and me to the Lands Below."

Silence hung in the air. Alexandra wondered again if she was going to look foolish.

Then Em reached a trembling hand out, and Alexandra dropped the obol into her outstretched palm. Tears welled up in the elf's eyes.

"You don't know anything about this compact," the house-elf moaned. "You don't know what you have done. But Em must accept Miss's payment." Stick-thin fingers closed slowly around the coin.

Maximilian had risen to his feet, and was now standing next to Alexandra. "So it's true?" he breathed. "You elves can take us to the Lands Below?"

Em let out a whispery sigh. "Elveses' purpose is not to take you there. Elveses is here to keep you on this side, and them on the other side. That is what Charmbridge elves have done for generations. But this coin is older than Charmbridge. It is older than the compact." She pointed at the clay floor. "Stand there."

Alexandra looked up at Maximilian. He looked down at her, and then the two of them stepped forward, onto the dark clay floor. A shiver went through them both. Maximilian's hand fell on Alexandra's shoulder. Charlie made a nervous sound, sitting on her other shoulder. Alexandra gripped her broom tightly in one hand, and her wand in the other.

"I'm sorry, Em," Alexandra repeated.

"No, Miss. Em is sorry." The elf blinked sadly, and then the clay became insubstantial shadow, and Alexandra and Maximilian dropped through the floor and fell into darkness.

The Lands Below

They were plummeting, in pitch darkness. Alexandra heard Charlie screeching, close by her ear, and Maximilian calling her name.

She was trying to hook her legs around her broom as they fell, and then she hit water. The shock of the impact almost made her suck in a breath, which would probably have been fatal. She was underwater, and it was freezing and dark. Fighting against panic, she kicked her feet, realized she was upside down, kicked again to right herself, and then pushed upwards.

Her head broke the surface of the water and she felt cold, damp air on her face. She gasped, and heard splashing next to her.

“Max!” she cried. “Charlie!”

“Alexandra!” cawed Charlie from overhead. It was too dark to see, but she heard the raven's wings flapping.

“I'm here. Don't swallow the water!” Maximilian sputtered, from a few yards away.

She had lost her grip on her broom, but she still had her wand. She dog-paddled blindly, until she heard Maximilian say, “Lumos!” In the sudden flare of light, she saw a vast cavern, so large that the light shed by Maximilian's wand didn't reach to the walls or ceiling. Eerie columns, sloped stone mounds, and other ancient rock formations surrounded them, and Alexandra couldn't really get a good sense of its size from where she was treading water.

Maximilian rose out of the inky black water on his broom, looking like some great dripping bat. He set down at the edge of the pool, where Alexandra could now see a rocky shelf. She paddled through the water towards him, and he knelt by the water's edge and reached a hand out. She took it, and he pulled her ashore. Her feet slipped a little on the wet stone as she tried to stand, and she almost went back into the water, but Maximilian held on to her.

As they both regained their balance, Maximilian slapped her on the back. She hacked and spat out some of the water that had entered her mouth, while Charlie landed on her shoulder. Her brother turned his head and spat. "Make sure you don't eat or drink anything while you're down here, except what we brought with us," he said.

"Don't eat while in the underworld." Alexandra nodded, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "That's one of those things that would have been really good to tell me before we got here – which I guess you would have, if you'd actually been planning on bringing me."

"Is this really a good time to start a fight?" he asked dryly.

She sighed, and shook her head. Water went flying and Charlie squawked. "Anything else you'd like to tell me, now that we're down here?"

"Nothing is likely to be what it seems. Be polite to anyone or anything we meet, but assume everything will try to kill us. If we can't get someone to show us a way out, we'll never leave. And I only brought one tent."

She wrinkled her nose. "I hope this isn't going to be a long camping trip." She held up her wand and cast a Light Spell of her own.

As her wand added illumination to the cavern, she squinted at her brother. "Where's your pack?"

"In the water." He pointed his wand. "Where's your broom?"

"Ditto." She turned around, and pointed her wand in the same direction. Now she could see that the water they had fallen into was a small underground lake – really more of a pond – filling a bowl-like depression in the rocky floor of this vast cavern. The water stretched off into the distance, where there were more tunnels and caves, and it was impossible to see how deep it was. But her broom was not far away, floating on the surface, and Maximilian's pack was bobbing in the water a few yards beyond it.

She tried a Summoning Charm: "Accio broom!"

Nothing happened, much to her disappointment. Usually she at least got some movement, but there wasn't so much as a ripple in the water. She ground her teeth in frustration, and Maximilian shook his head.

"Calm down, and focus." He pointed his wand at the floating backpack. "Accio pack!"

The pack didn't move either. Alexandra turned to her brother, with a raised eyebrow.

"That shouldn't be," he muttered. He repeated the incantation: "Accio backpack!"

"Huh." Alexandra tried not to look smug, as Maximilian's spell had no more effect than hers had. Then they noticed something glowing underwater. As the glow became brighter, several yellow lights appeared, below their floating gear.

"Umm..." Alexandra licked her lips. "Are those...?"

"Eyes," Maximilian grunted, and to her annoyance, he stepped in front of her and started to push her behind him. She side-stepped so she could see what was rising to the surface.

The yellow lights were indeed eyes, bright glowing eyes that seemed lit from within. A pair of dark heads broke the surface, and Alexandra saw that the eyes were set in menacing feline faces that began floating across the surface of the pool towards them, baring mouthfuls of sharp teeth.

"Underwater panthers," Maximilian gulped.

"I've read about those." Alexandra knew she should probably be more frightened and less fascinated. "They're supposed to be really dangerous."

“They are.” Maximilian nodded, and began pushing her again, as he backed away from the approaching cats. There was another, smaller pool of water behind them, so they were forced to step sideways along a narrow, slippery, rocky ledge that ran between the pools, towards higher ground where the floor of the cavern rose upwards away from the water. “According to legend, they can breathe fire and pestilence. The Indians say they’re the most dangerous of magical beasts.” He grabbed her wrist and forced her hand down, as she pointed her wand at the panthers. “And their hides are known to repel spells. They’re probably the reason our Summoning Charms didn’t work.”

“Great. How do we get our stuff?”

“First worry how we’re going to get away.”

Charlie squawked in alarm. Alexandra looked behind them as they edged towards the ‘shore,’ while the two underwater panthers reached the rocky ledge along which they were retreating, and unhurriedly dragged themselves out of the water. “Umm, Max?”

“Keep moving,” he hissed under his breath, still with his eyes on the cats, only yards away.

“That’s kind of a problem.”

Maximilian turned his head slowly. Another cat had emerged from the smaller pool, and was now blocking their retreat. They could see more glowing lantern-like eyes rising to the surface on either side of them.

Maximilian thrust his broom at her. “Turn around and hold on tight.”

“What –?”

“Do as I say!” The three panthers already out of the water were within pouncing distance. Their eyes glowed eerily in the darkness, giving all of them a demonic appearance, and the nearest one opened its mouth and yowled softly.

Alexandra turned her back on her brother, shoved her wand into a pocket, with the lit end still sticking out, and gripped the broom tightly in both hands. "Get ready to fly, Charlie!" she whispered. Charlie trilled nervously. She felt Maximilian turning also, and he reached around her, grabbed the broom, and pulled it and her against him, so he was hugging them both against his chest.

"Ready?" he whispered. Alexandra nodded.

The broom shot straight into the air, and for a moment, they were both hanging on for dear life, feet kicking in the air as the broom threatened to accelerate out of their grasps. Charlie screeched and flapped upwards, letting go of Alexandra's shoulder, and the panthers howled and leapt at them. One almost caught Alexandra's dangling foot with the swipe of a paw, and another missed Charlie by a whisker. Alexandra saw fire belch from the cat's mouth. Then they were climbing higher and higher, towards the distant ceiling of the cavern. Maximilian forced the broom to level off, and they were both able to wrap their legs around the broomstick and balance themselves on it. Far below, on the floor of the cavern, the panthers were now looking up at them with their baleful glowing eyes, and sending more belches of fire upwards. Charlie cawed and circled around them.

Alexandra let out a little sigh of relief. She could feel her brother's arms and legs pressing against hers from behind, and she tilted her head back, until it bumped into his shoulder. "You okay?"

"Yes. But we need that pack. We can't last long down here without supplies."

"Those cats aren't going anywhere," Alexandra muttered. "Maybe we could –" She brandished her wand.

"No!" Maximilian snapped, grabbing her wrist again. "I told you, their hides will reflect curses."

"Then we're kind of screwed, aren't we?"

Maximilian rotated them slowly in place, making out what he could of the base of the cavern. There were numerous dark openings visible along the circumference of the chamber, likely leading to other caverns, but no caves or outcroppings presented themselves higher along the walls. Even Charlie could find no place to sit out of the panthers' reach, and settled in front of Alexandra on the end of their broom.

"You think you can cast a few Gouging Spells?" Maximilian asked.

"Sure," she replied. "But what for?"

He leaned, and they began drifting closer to the nearest sloping rock wall. "Make a hole, there," he directed, pointing at a spot level with them, about sixty feet up from the cavern floor.

Alexandra didn't see how this was going to help them long-term, but she refrained from asking questions, and instead pointed her wand and concentrated fiercely. "Defodio!"

Maximilian did likewise, and the two of them together began hollowing out a small niche in the cavern wall, while below them, the panthers hissed and yowled, and one even tried leaping at them. It reached an impressive height, but fell well below the two teenagers on the broom. The dirt and rocks tumbling down on the cats only seemed to anger them more, and Charlie aggravated them further with a mocking cackle. They continued breathing fire and growling.

It only took a minute before the magically excavated cave was large enough for two people to sit in. Maximilian held Alexandra's arm as she placed her other hand on the ledge, and then quickly transferred her weight from the broom to the rocky shelf, and pulled herself into the small recess as far as she could, with her legs hanging over the side. Maximilian then simply tilted the broom and slid himself off of it and onto the ledge next to her. Once settled, Maximilian handed his broom to her.

"What now?" she asked, as she took the Twister across her lap, with Charlie still perched upon it. One of the beasts took a running leap up the side of the cavern wall, but its claws scrabbled futilely against the

rock, far below their dangling feet, and it hissed and spat flames at them before sliding back to the floor. They were safe for the moment, but the only way out appeared to be through one of those tunnels down at the panthers' level.

Maximilian was staring past the cats, at the pool where Alexandra's broom and his pack were still floating, dark bumps on the water that could barely be seen from where they were sitting. "We need to get my pack back, before the momma cat shows up," he murmured.

"Momma cat?" Alexandra exclaimed.

He nodded. "These are cubs. You said you read about underwater panthers. Didn't you read that they have copper hides and horns when they're grown?"

"I thought that part was an old wizards' tale. Like hodags and hide-behinds." She stared down at the cubs, each of which was the size of a mountain lion.

He exhaled. "Okay. I think I can do this." He looked at her. "I need you to keep these critters distracted, and their attention on you. Yell, make a fuss, be annoying – you're good at that."

Her eyes narrowed. "What are you going to do?"

"We don't have time for you to whine 'who-what-how-why?' every time I tell you to do something!" he snapped, in the same voice he used when barking orders in JROC. "I need you to stop being a child and start being a witch, Alexandra!"

She blinked. His words stung, but she nodded. "Okay," she replied, in a subdued voice.

"If something happens," he went on, in a gentler tone, "take the broom and get out of here if you can, down one of those tunnels. This cavern is only an antechamber to the Lands Below. You are clever and resourceful, Alexandra. I'll wager you can make it on your own, somehow, if you have to."

She sucked in a breath. "Don't you dare!" She shook her head. "Whatever you're going to do, don't even think about not coming back!"

He smiled. "Wish me luck, then. Now draw their attention – but remember, don't try to throw spells at them."

Alexandra swallowed, and looked down at the cats.

"Hey!" she yelled. "Here, kitty-kitties!" She leaned over, and held her hands next to her ears and waved her fingers tauntingly as she made a loud raspberry sound. Charlie screeched and flew into the air, and the cats all opened their mouths and howled angrily.

Next to her, Maximilian disappeared, with a pop.

She had just enough time to gasp in surprise, and then she saw a shadowy figure moving at the edge of the large pool from which the cats had emerged. Her breath caught in her throat, and then she yelled again. "Neener, neener, neener! Meeeyowww!" She picked up a rock and threw it down at the panthers. It didn't hit any of them, but all five of them hissed and sent such a torrent of flames in her direction that she could feel the heat even where she was sitting. Charlie added a few taunting catcalls as well. The panthers all began hurling themselves against the cavern wall, trying to scale it, but after Alexandra held her breath a moment, looking straight down into their furious, glowing eyes, she saw that even the magical cats couldn't climb a vertical rock face.

"I tought I taw a puddy tat!" she called mockingly, and then she heard a splash, and all five cats' heads jerked around to look back at the water. Something was swimming across the pool, and Alexandra screamed even more loudly and waved her arms, trying to regain the panthers' attention.

"Hey! Hey, you stupid furballs! HEY!" She threw more rocks, but while two continued pacing at the foot of the rock wall beneath her, three began running back towards the pool of water.

In desperation, she pointed her wand and shouted, “Stupefy!” A red beam shot out and struck one of the panthers, then rebounded directly back at her. She yelped in surprise, barely rolled aside as it hit the inside of the cave next to her, and then grabbed for the broom as she almost went tumbling over the edge. She regained her balance, barely, but saw that her Stunning Spell had hardly distracted the cats, and they were now at the edge of the pool.

“MAX!” she screamed, and then a dripping shape rose from the water, and kept rising as two panthers leapt at it. They landed in the water, and rather than making a splash, they disappeared beneath the surface without a ripple. The third panther leapt straight up with a roar, and unleashed another belch of flames, as Maximilian came soaring triumphantly towards Alexandra on her broom, backpack in hand.

He reached their small cave refuge and hovered in front of her, grinning, dripping more water down on the angry cats below. “Trade brooms?”

“Are you crazy?” she sputtered. “You stupid idiot! You could have been killed!”

“Do you know what the word 'irony' means?” He smiled as he slid from his broom to the rocky ledge once again. “Easy as pie.”

She shook her head, then something other than his recklessness struck her. “You can teleport!”

“It's not teleporting, it's –”

“Apparating, I know. You can Apparate!”

He nodded. “Don't tell anyone. I don't have my license yet.” His eyes twinkled, as he said with wry humor, “I wouldn't want to get in trouble.”

She punched his shoulder. “Jerk!”

Whatever retort he had in mind died as they heard a loud roar echo through the cavern.

Alexandra gulped. "Please tell me that's not –"

"Momma." Maximilian nodded. He looked down at the dark tunnel mouths. "All right, we have no choice – I'm going to pick one tunnel and go down it. You follow me close, and don't stop for anything, even if I fall behind." He gave her a stern look, as she opened her mouth to argue. She closed her mouth, swallowed, and nodded. They both mounted their brooms, and Alexandra coaxed Charlie over to her, and then tucked the raven under her arm. She didn't think a raven could fly as fast as a 2009 Valkyrie at full speed, but Charlie squawked and fussed and wasn't happy about it.

She couldn't help asking: "What if the tunnel we choose is a dead end?"

"Then we're kind of screwed," Maximilian replied. Another roar actually shook dust from the ceiling, and seemed to come from much too close. Three of the underwater panther cubs dashed across the cavern floor, while the two that had dived into the pool after Maximilian earlier appeared once more on the surface.

Alexandra and Maximilian descended like meteors, shooting towards a dark hole gaping in their path. The panther cubs spun in place, claws skittering against stone, and began bounding after them, and Alexandra saw something huge squeeze its way out of another tunnel. She caught a metallic gleam, in the light cast by their wands, and then fire seemed to fill the entire cavern behind them.

Gripping her broom with one hand, while hunched over and holding Charlie against her stomach with the other, she followed Maximilian into the hole. It had looked much too small when they were diving at it from above in near-darkness, but as they shot past the mouth of the tunnel, Alexandra could see that it was big enough for a train to pass through.

Or a really big cat, she thought.

"Ter Lumos!" Maximilian shouted, and his wand glowed even more brightly than before, blazing like the headlight of a locomotive. The

two of them hurtled down the tunnel, which was more or less straight for about twenty yards, before it began sloping away and downwards. Maximilian reached over one shoulder, and pulled a small bag out of his backpack. He held it out at arm's length and dumped out its contents. Alexandra saw spiky metal things, like large jacks, go tumbling away, strike the ground, and begin bouncing. Each one turned red-hot as soon as it hit the floor of the tunnel, and when they bounced against each other, they began multiplying. Then the glowing caltrops fell away behind them.

Maximilian decelerated a little and allowed her to pass him. She looked at him questioningly, and he ordered her, "Keep going!"

Reluctantly, she did, but she looked over her shoulder to make sure he wasn't falling out of sight. Only a few yards behind her, he pointed his wand at the ceiling of the tunnel and shouted, "Deprimo!" The ceiling exploded over his head, and left a shower of rocks in his wake. He did this several more times, filling the tunnel with bangs and flashes of light.

She couldn't see whether or not his spells were actually collapsing the tunnel behind them. Then she had to look ahead again, to steer her broom. The tunnel followed a generally straight course, occasionally sloping or bending slightly. Numerous smaller tunnels branching away from the main one flashed past. And then, as suddenly as they had entered the passageway, she emerged into a much larger cavern, with Maximilian right behind her.

Alexandra assumed it was a cavern, anyway. This one made the lair of the underwater panthers seem tiny; when she looked up, she couldn't even see the roof overhead, and when she looked right and left, she saw an enormous, gray, shadowy landscape. Off in the distance were, she was almost certain, hills and rivers. A vast underworld stretched out before them, soft and gray, like the contours of a blanket seen in dim moonlight. She couldn't see where the light was coming from, as above them was a featureless black void. She couldn't tell how she was able to see so far at all. The rock wall from which they had just emerged towered above them, yet ended so far below the starless 'sky' that it seemed like a tiny and inconsequential feature on this otherworldly landscape. Alexandra felt a moment of

disorientation; her sense of distance and perspective was completely off down here.

"These are the Lands Below," Maximilian declared, unnecessarily. She merely nodded, overwhelmed. Then, a sense of wonder seized hold of her, and she suddenly began laughing. She let go of Charlie, who flapped only a few feet into the air before landing on her broomstick with a subdued caw.

Maximilian, sitting on his broom, stared at her. "What in Merlin's name are you laughing about?" he demanded.

"We made it!" She grinned. And as he kept staring at her, she said, "Come on, Max! We're on an adventure! And we survived the first part... isn't that kind of cool?"

"Cool," he repeated, with a disbelieving expression.

She sighed. "I know, Max. It's dangerous. I haven't forgotten, and I am taking this seriously, I swear. But isn't it exciting – just a little bit?"

Her brother stared at her for several moments more, then shook his head. "No."

He descended towards the ground, and she followed, a little deflated. "What now?" she asked.

"Now we start walking."

"Walking? What did we bring brooms for?"

"To get away from underwater panthers." He regarded her solemnly as she landed next to him, but she had learned to recognize his dry sense of humor. She put one hand on her hip, expecting more of an explanation.

"We're here as strangers, hoping to be received as guests," Maximilian explained. "We don't know much about the Lands Below, the Little People, or whatever other powers may dwell here." He waved a hand to take in the vast dark realm surrounding them. "But

Father believes that zipping around on brooms is likely to be seen as disrespectful. That's a frequent complaint Indians have about us – we're impatient, always in a hurry to get somewhere.”

“I thought we're here to talk to magical beings, not Indians.”

“Indian wizards used to come here and treat with these beings, and they didn't ride brooms.” He held up a hand, as Alexandra started to argue again. “What did you promise back in the basement?”

Angrily, she closed her mouth.

“Since we don't know where we're going, there's no point getting there any faster, and being up in the air just makes us more visible,” he pointed out.

“Fine.” Reluctantly, she balanced her broom over the shoulder that Charlie wasn't sitting on.

Maximilian pointed his wand at her soaking wet clothes. “Exaresco.” Water turned to steam and billowed away from her, leaving her dry in moments.

“You need to teach me that one,” she said.

He nodded, as he applied the Drying Charm to himself.

“Why didn't you tell me you can Apparate?”

“Because you'd pester me to teach you.” His lips showed a trace of a smile.

“Well, yeah!”

“Forget it.” He shook his head. “You can start taking lessons when you're sixteen, like everyone else.”

“Whatever.” She decided not to argue. But she was definitely going to pester him when they got back. She took a breath. “Which way?”

In every direction but the way they'd come, an equally endless trek appeared before them, so Maximilian shrugged his pack back on, and pointed. "This way." They began walking.

Their 'adventure' was somewhat less exciting after a few hours of walking across barren gray rocks. They crossed a number of small underground streams, but other than moss and lichen, there was no sign of life. Alexandra thought this was an awfully empty, dismal place for such a carefully guarded realm, and said so.

"I'd guess with all the gates sealed, they don't get many visitors from our lands," Maximilian mused. "Maybe they figure a gate guarded by underwater panthers isn't likely to see anyone coming through it and making it out on this side."

They crawled over some particularly large rocks, topping a small hill. The Lands Below were not unlike pictures she had seen of the surface of the moon, Alexandra thought, except for the water and the lichens. It was nearly as quiet as she imagined the moon to be. Occasionally she and Maximilian heard something flapping in the air overhead. Charlie cawed in response, but they heard no other sounds disturbing the still, cool air.

"Maybe we should just, I don't know, send up a flare or something? Make some sparks with our wands?" she suggested. "I mean, we want to find the people who live here, right?"

"Indian and Colonial legends alike say that you'd best be polite when treating with beings who live in the Lands Below," Maximilian countered. "Making a commotion and demanding their attention probably wouldn't be considered polite."

Alexandra looked around the relatively flat, sandy field they were now traversing, between ridges and tumbles of rocks, and paused. "Max, look!" She pointed.

There in the cold, gritty sand, they could see something growing. In fact, all around them, droopy, brownish-green plants of some sort poked feebly out of the inhospitable terrain. None were more than a foot high, and their leaves lay flat on the ground around them, wilted

and lifeless. To Alexandra, the plants' nearly-dead appearance was less remarkable than the fact that they were here at all. She had never gotten as far as magical plants in Mr. Fledgefield's Magical Ecology class, but she didn't see how anything could grow down here, deprived of soil, water, or sunlight.

Maximilian seemed to be thinking the same thing. He knelt next to one plant and examined it, without touching it.

"If I didn't know better," he muttered, "I'd say these look like corn stalks."

"Corn?" Alexandra shook her head. "How can corn grow down here?"

"How can anything live down here? These are the Lands Below, Alexandra. Forget what you think you know."

"Okay, Mr. Know-it-all. So what is corn doing in the Lands Below?"

"Dying," whispered a sad voice.

Maximilian and Alexandra both blinked, and looked at each other.

"So cold," whispered another voice.

"So dark," whispered a third. And then a chorus of voices drifted up to them, in the still air.

"Our father the sun,
our mother the moon,
our brother the wind,
oh, how we miss them!
We fell through a crack,
and here the stones are our brothers,
snakes and scorpions our sisters.
We lonely and forgotten ones."

Their sad lament filled the air. Alexandra found herself feeling sorry for the dying plants.

Maximilian stood up. "Come on. We'd best not meddle with what we don't understand."

The voices of the corn plants continued chanting, dirge-like:

"Where is the sun? Not here.
Where is the moon? Not here.
Where is the wind? Not here.
Only we are here.
We lonely and forgotten ones."

"Can't we... do something?" she asked.

Maximilian shook his head. "We can't help them, Alexandra."

"How do you know? Maybe they can help us!" She knelt next to one of the wilted plants.

"What do you need?" she asked.

There was a pause in their chanting, and then a tiny voice said, "Bring us the sun."

"Bring us the wind," whispered another.

"Tell our father we are here."

"He will crack the ground and split the sky!"

The voices pleaded with her. She looked up at Maximilian, who just frowned and shook his head. "We can't exactly bring the sun down here."

"But we can create light! With our wands." She held up her wand. "Ter Lumos!" Her wand flared and died. She frowned, looking at the tip.

"You mispronounced it, and the angle was wrong..." Maximilian exhaled through his teeth. "You can't just imitate every spell you see. You're going to hurt yourself if you keep trying that."

"You do it, then."

"It's not sunlight, Alexandra. Magic can't create sunlight."

"Are you going to keep saying 'can't-can't-can't' every time I suggest something?"

Maximilian's face turned dark and angry. She took a step back. "It can't hurt," she insisted. "I do have good ideas sometimes, you know. That's why you brought me, because I'm clever and resourceful."

"I brought you because you gave me no choice!" he yelled. Growling in frustration, he raised his wand overhead. "Fine. Ter Lumos!"

His wand blazed, casting a brilliant light on the two of them, and on the corn plants. Stark shadows radiated away from all of them, and then the shadows of the plants began moving.

The plants were stirring. Their drooping, half-dead leaves curled upwards, reaching towards the light, and the sagging stalks began to straighten. Then they all began growing, stretching upwards, and the leaves parted, and Alexandra and Maximilian both gasped in astonishment, as arms and heads appeared, emerging like strange flowers from the corn stalks, which were now waist-high.

Alexandra looked at her brother, but he seemed as surprised and baffled as she was.

The stalks widened, and the heads all raised their faces towards the light radiating from Maximilian's wand. Now shoulders and torsos emerged. They were all young and female, and pretty. And naked. They looked like Indian maidens, with long hair rippling, leaf-like, in wide plaits that merged with their stalks. They reached towards Maximilian with their bare arms, and Alexandra raised her wand, prepared to defend herself or her brother. Maximilian held a hand up, shaking his head. He looked wary, but not frightened.

"It is a pale light," complained one of the corn girls.

“Like our mother behind the clouds,” bemoaned another.

“But oh, it shines!”

“It shines!”

“It shines!”

The voices echoed, wistful and desirous. The nearest maidens clutched at Maximilian's pack and his sleeves, but he shrugged them off easily; they seemed to be almost insubstantial.

Charlie cawed, and the girls' heads turned in the raven's direction.

“Raven!”

“You have found us!”

“Oh, wise, clever bird!”

“This isn't helping,” Maximilian muttered. “I don't see what we can do for them.”

“We can't bring you the sun,” Alexandra told them. “And we can't stay. I'm sorry.”

The corn girls were all looking at her now, and Charlie on her shoulder.

“Take news of us to our father!” they pleaded.

“Your father, the sun?” she asked. This sounded like something out of a fairy tale. How could the sun literally be their father? But their heads all bobbed, like ears of corn.

“He will crack the ground and split the sky!”

“He will send wind and rain!”

Alexandra licked her lips hesitantly. "I'll try," she promised, while Maximilian stared at her. "If I ever meet... your father, the sun, I'll tell him." She glanced at her brother. "I know something about being forgotten by your father."

They all sighed, and then began to weep. Alexandra had no idea what to make of these strange, piteous creatures. "Can you help us?" she asked. "We're looking for the Little People."

"Little People?" piped the nearest maiden, wiping her tears from her face.

"Who are these? We know only of the Two-Legged People and the Four-Legged People," murmured another.

"And the Screaming Water People, and the Smoking Rock People," added a third.

"We're looking for the people who rule the Lands Below," Alexandra explained. "The ones who control the gates between this world and the world above."

"Gates?" mused the girls, not understanding, but then one spoke up. "Only the Generous Ones bring things from the world above."

"That is true." One of her sisters nodded, and the girls whispered agreement amongst themselves.

"But never for us, not pollen or even a single drop of water."

The brilliant light at the end of Maximilian's wand was beginning to dim, and the corn maidens all cried in dismay, reaching towards him again. Uncomfortably, he shrugged away their clinging hands, as they began to shrink, still stretching desperately towards the source of light.

"How can we find the Generous Ones?" Alexandra asked, kneeling next to the nearest maiden, who had already nearly disappeared back into her stalk.

“Send Raven,” the girl told her, in a voice that was hardly more than a soft whistle. “The Generous Ones may give it a gift.”

“Send my raven where?” Alexandra implored, desperately, as the corn plants were now almost back to their previous stunted size, and wilting back to the ground.

“If it returns...” The voice was a whisper so soft Alexandra wasn't certain she'd heard, and she strained her ears to hear the rest, but Maximilian's Light Spell had ended, and the corn plants were now nearly lifeless husks lying on the ground again. All they could hear were whispers, chanting but almost inaudible:

“We lonely and forgotten ones. Oh!
We lonely and forgotten ones. Oh!
We lonely and forgotten ones.”

Alexandra shivered. She felt moved by the plight of the corn maidens, yet the subliminal voices were creepy and disturbing.

“What do you think you're doing, making promises to beings you don't know?” Maximilian hissed.

She looked back at him defiantly. “If I ever do meet the sun,” she said, “I'll keep my promise.”

Maximilian stared at her a moment longer, then made a snorting noise, like a strangled laugh. “Come on, Troublesome.” He resumed walking, and she followed him.

“Anyway, now we know more than we did before,” she pointed out. “We're looking for the Generous Ones. And Charlie can find them.” She bit her lip. If it returns...

Maximilian looked at the raven on Alexandra's shoulder. “How can Charlie do that? Do you know where these Generous Ones are, bird?”

Charlie cawed, but Alexandra couldn't tell whether it was meant to be affirmation, or a 'What-are-you-talking-about-you-silly-human?' caw.

“Well, I’m not an expert on Indian legends, or the Lands Below...” Alexandra began, and Maximilian snorted. She glared at him, and he rolled his eyes.

“Okay?” he coaxed, indicating she should continue.

“I read lots of stories about people going on journeys, and birds, too, flying to the houses of, I don’t know, the sun and the moon, or where some hero lived. I mean, a lot of it didn’t make sense. Except that kind of thing happens in fairy tales all the time. Not just Indian legends.” Alexandra almost laughed as she realized that something she’d learned in Vacation Bible School might actually be relevant. “I think there was even something about the raven going out to find things in the Bible.”

Maximilian blinked at her. “What does that tell us?” he demanded.

Alexandra turned her head to look at Charlie. She swallowed, thinking again about the corn girl’s words. “If it returns.”

“Familiars always return to you,” she murmured softly.

“Alexandra,” Charlie crooned, as she lifted her familiar from her shoulder.

“I need you to go... find the Generous Ones,” she said. The raven tilted its head and regarded her inquisitively with its beady, black eyes. She knew Charlie couldn’t really understand the specifics of what she was asking. She reached into a pocket, and pulled out a handful of owl treats she’d been saving for the bird. She held them out in the palm of her hand, and Charlie gobbled them up greedily.

“Bring back a gift, Charlie,” she said hoarsely. She had the feeling this was the right thing to do, but it was just a hunch, from reading books of fairy tales, and listening to the nonsensical babbling of a dying plant. If the Lands Below were dangerous to humans, they must be no less dangerous to ravens.

She reached under her shirt, and pulled out the locket she'd been wearing. Charlie's eyes gleamed.

"Bring back a gift, and I'll let you have all the shiny things you want to play with," she promised.

Charlie sat on her outstretched wrist a moment, then cawed, "Alexandra!" and took off.

She stood and watched as the raven flapped away – it only took seconds before the black bird disappeared against the endless dark backdrop of the Lands Below.

She looked away as Maximilian put a hand on her shoulder. There was a hard lump in her throat. What if Charlie got eaten by something? Even a raven could get lost down here, and starve to death. The horrible fates that could befall her familiar suddenly seemed much more real and ominous than the horrible fates that might await herself and her brother.

"Ravens are wise birds," Maximilian said, echoing his mother's words. "They don't get lost."

She nodded.

"Come on," he continued briskly. "Charlie may return with a gift, or directions, but I don't want to just sit here waiting. If we keep walking, we're bound to meet someone."

Alexandra wasn't sure how logical that was, but walking beat standing there worrying about Charlie, so she hoisted her broom over her shoulder, and followed her brother across the endless gloom.

Bewi and the Lagaru

Maximilian and Alexandra walked for two more hours. There was no change in the ghostly gray light that cloaked the Lands Below in perpetual dusk. Maximilian's Danger Alarm jangled a few times when they approached tumbled piles of rocks or dark crevices that seemed to go deep, deep into the earth, and each time, they took a wide detour, though they never saw the source of the alarm's warning.

Alexandra was a little more careful to look around when they sat down, during their periodic rests, just in case the corn maidens' line about snakes and scorpions had also been literal.

The Lands Below had seemed almost lifeless at first, but gradually they began to notice other things besides lichen and mushrooms. They crossed black streams that were lined with dark green weeds, and walked warily around another large pool of water that had plants that looked like lily pads floating on it, though the 'flowers' on the pads were grotesque, worm-like things. They walked through clouds of black flies, which Maximilian banished with a Vermin Repelling Charm. Sometimes, things skittered and slithered out of their path, or they caught movement out of the corner of their eye. They heard flapping noises overhead, too. Alexandra looked up each time, hoping it was Charlie, and worrying about what else could be up there.

"Just bats," Maximilian assured her, after the sixth or seventh time something unseen flapped overhead.

"Nothing down here is what it seems," she repeated. Why had she sent Charlie away? It was impossible to know the time of day – there was no 'day' – but she knew they had been walking for a long time, and she was very tired.

Maximilian looked at a pocket watch in his coat pocket, and announced, "Let's stop for the night."

She nodded, looking at the sky. How far would Charlie fly before returning? How long?

They encountered another underground stream, this one wide enough that they used their brooms to cross it. On the other side, they found a mostly flat stretch of packed gray clay, on a slight rise surrounded by the sort of small rocky hills that dominated this landscape. They had seen some ghostly white fish swimming in the stream, but Alexandra had no desire to try to catch or eat them. Instead, Maximilian handed her a can with a plain blue and white wrapper around it. She frowned at the label: 'Magically-Ready Meal,' below the Regimental Officer Corps crest and the Confederation seal.

Maximilian popped open his can. He pulled out several long strips of jerky, a tied bundle of dried vegetables, and a cookie, then poured the can over a bowl, and some sort of corn mush spilled out, steaming hot.

Alexandra's tiny can produced a small bag of dried apple slices, two chicken drumsticks, hot though a little desiccated in appearance, a small piece of chocolate, and, when she dumped the rest of her can into a bowl, a lump of mashed potatoes.

"You can live indefinitely on MRMs," said Maximilian. "Get used to them."

Alexandra wrinkled her nose, and nodded. They ate in silence, while the only other noise was the faint sound of water running sluggishly in the stream downhill, and occasional flapping overhead. Maximilian finished his meal, and carefully tucked away the can, then unrolled a green tent. Alexandra thought she'd seen tents like that in the JROC Headquarters storage room; it looked awfully small for two people to share. Maximilian erected it with a wave of his wand, then circled their campsite casting protective charms and wards.

When he held the flap open, though, and bade her enter, she poked her head in and gasped in surprise. The interior was larger than the room she shared with Anna back at Charmbridge, and contained bunk beds for eight people, chests and cushions, a small commode, and even a writing desk with a lamp.

"Awesome," she murmured, and entered the tent. Maximilian followed.

Alexandra slept fitfully. She woke up several times and listened for noises, but nothing disturbed the air outside their tent that she could hear. When it was finally 'morning' (according to Maximilian's alarm clock), she rose quickly, and put her clothes back on, behind the curtain that Maximilian had conjured to hang as a barrier between his side of the tent and hers. The commode was a definite improvement over using Defodio to dig a hole behind a rock.

"Wait!" Maximilian ordered, as he was pulling on his boots, but she was already darting out of the tent and looking around.

It was the same dismal gray landscape as before. And Charlie was nowhere to be seen. Her shoulders slumped. Maximilian stormed out of the tent, angry and ready to yell at her, but he paused when he saw her morose, worried expression.

"Charlie will be fine," he reassured her. "If anything can find its way around the Lands Below, it's a raven."

She nodded, not feeling at all reassured.

His hand fell on her shoulder, and he squeezed it, half in affection, half in anger. "Don't run off like that!" he warned.

"I only stepped outside. There's nothing here." She looked up, and caught his angry expression, the suppressed fury in his eyes. Her brother was trying very hard not to erupt at her, she realized.

"I won't do it again," she promised.

He looked at her for another moment, and then his hand relaxed. "Let's see if that stream is fit to bathe in," he said.

The water running through this vast subterranean realm appeared to be quite clean, in fact, though Alexandra knew a Muggle scientist would say there was no telling what sort of bacteria or other bad things might be in it. The pale white, blob-like fish squiggled away from them, and after setting his Danger Alarm down, and casting several charms on and around the stream, Maximilian satisfied himself that they would not be pounced on by underwater panthers or

other creatures if they entered the water. He told Alexandra to bathe first, while he stood guard.

She undressed, feeling a little exposed surrounded by the vast, empty landscape and an impenetrable darkness overhead, and stepped into the stream. She clenched her teeth, and told Maximilian, "It's freezing cold!"

"What did you expect?" he laughed. He was standing with his back to the stream, his wand at the ready.

Shivering, she forced herself to the deepest part of the stream, which barely came up to her waist, and knelt to submerge herself quickly in the cold, black water. It was good to wash the sweat and grime of the previous day off, but she jumped back ashore as quickly as she could. She considered trying to cast *Exaresco* on herself, but she didn't want Maximilian to lecture her again about using unfamiliar spells. She settled for drying herself as thoroughly as she could with a small towel, and then dressed.

Next she stood guard as Maximilian took his turn bathing in the stream.

"Charlie's really helpful as a lookout," she muttered, with her back to him.

"Charlie will come back, Alexandra." She heard him take a breath, and then there was a splash as he dunked himself. "Merlin, that is cold!" he sputtered, as he emerged.

She caught motion in the corner of her eye, and turned her head, just a little.

She thought she might catch something darting under a rock, but nothing was moving at all. Then she saw what her eyes had passed over at first, and she gasped, "Max!"

A dozen yards away, where another smooth, igneous rock formation rose alongside a bend in the stream, a woman was crouching, with

her hands pressed against the rocks on either side of her. Her eyes were fixed on Maximilian.

She started when Alexandra saw her and called out, and for a moment, she stared directly back at her. Then, brazenly, she turned her head again to look at Maximilian, who had stood straight up, as Alexandra could see in her peripheral vision.

The woman only moved when Alexandra and Maximilian both pointed their wands at her. Then she stood and darted behind the rock formation, in a flash.

“Wait!” Maximilian called, as he scrambled towards the edge of the stream where his clothes were, but she was gone.

“That was creepy,” Alexandra commented, still watching where the woman had been lurking, as Maximilian got dressed. “Should we chase her?”

“No.” Maximilian shook his head. “Stay alert. We don't know who – or what – she might have been.” He pulled on his clothes without bothering to dry himself, and they ate and packed quickly.

They resumed walking across the gray landscape. It gradually became more of a grayish-brown, as they descended into a long, stony gully that zigzagged and branched into other chasms whose walls reached ten or twenty feet up. They seemed to have entered a region that was made up of a vast network of giant cracks in the ground. Maximilian took out his Lost Traveler's Compass and made sure Alexandra still knew how to command the needle to direct them back the way they'd come. Unfortunately, it could show them nothing else – its ability to display distance, direction, and relative location were all useless in the Lands Below.

Occasionally, they would use their brooms to rise out of boxed canyons or ravines that narrowed and became impassable on foot, but Maximilian insisted on walking the rest of the time.

“Distance and time aren't the same here,” he reminded her.

“Blisters are,” she grumbled. Her feet were beginning to hurt.

More bothersome than blisters was the occasional, but increasingly frequent, buzzing of Maximilian's Danger Alarm. Sometimes it was a snake, or a scorpion – they did live here, scuttling and slithering among the rocks, and some of them were big. Once they passed a cave, recessed into the wall of the chasm they were hiking through, about six feet off the ground, and the alarm rang loudly, as they saw a pair of yellow eyes gleaming back in the darkness. Maximilian hurried Alexandra along, as both of them held their wands at the ready, but whatever was lurking in the cave didn't emerge. The alarm stopped its noise, for a few minutes, once the cave was out of sight.

Sometimes the alarm would ring for no apparent reason, and they would both try to look in all directions at once. Yet nothing jumped out at them, and nothing chased them. Alexandra did occasionally get the feeling that they were being followed, though, and when she finally admitted this to Maximilian, he nodded and admitted that he felt it, too.

They stopped now and then, to drink water or eat another Magically-Ready Meal. Alexandra spoke little, increasingly worried about Charlie.

Distance and time aren't the same here, she thought. But her earlier feeling, that Charlie was meant to go and come back to them, increasingly struck her as stupid and foolish. She'd only sent her familiar away to starve or be killed in an alien landscape. She didn't admit to her brother how worried she was, but he sensed her mood, and he spoke to her a little more gently, when he spoke at all.

Maximilian finally decided to risk taking his broom up into the air, to get a better look at their surroundings. He descended quickly, chased by a swarm of bats that only dispersed when he and Alexandra sent jets of flame shooting out of their wands.

“Aggressive as heck,” he commented, and then closed his mouth when he saw the look on Alexandra's face, as she imagined Charlie being set upon by a swarm of bats.

“There's a river in that direction.” He pointed. “And these infernal cracks and gullies end where it flows. I saw what looks like a large underground lake, and flatter lands around it, so the hiking should be easier tomorrow.”

Two days, Alexandra thought. Tomorrow would be Sunday, back at Charmbridge. Assuming they returned after spending the same time away that they spent down here. If they didn't find the Generous Ones tomorrow, then Alexandra and Maximilian would be missing class. She laughed strangely, in a way that made Maximilian ask if she was all right.

She just nodded, and helped him set up the tent at a juncture where two long, relatively straight crevices in the ground met, after they inspected the immediate area and found nothing more threatening than a nest of lobster-sized scorpions that fled from a Vermin Repelling Charm. Alexandra was disturbed to see that the scorpions had flat faces with eyes, mouths, and noses, rather than bug-like features.

While Maximilian cast more wards all around their tent, Alexandra asked if they could light a torch or create a magical light that would help Charlie find them. He refused, but he allowed her to sit outside the tent after they ate. He came out and joined her, and they sat together quietly, after she declined his invitation to play Exploding Snap or chess. Alexandra stared off into the 'sky,' and the purplish black 'horizon,' wondering if it was even real. Her eyelids began to droop, and she kept nodding off. Her head would bump against Maximilian's shoulder and she would wake up, and try to stay awake again, maintaining her vigil for Charlie. She was a little surprised that Maximilian didn't start scolding her, or order her to go back into the tent and go to sleep.

She didn't notice when she fell asleep for the last time, and Maximilian carried her into the tent. She woke up a long time later, and realized she was lying on her cot, with Maximilian breathing softly on the other side of the tent. He had taken off her boots and her cloak, but had not undressed her further. She lay there for a while, and then closed her eyes and went back to sleep.

She was a little stiff when she awoke in the wrinkly clothes she'd slept in. She sat up, stretched and yawned, and then jumped to her feet. Maximilian was not in the tent, and she heard voices outside.

Alexandra stumbled out of the tent, still pulling on her boots. Her brother was a few yards away, and her mouth opened in surprise when she saw that he was talking to a strange woman – the same woman they had seen spying on them the day before!

The stranger had brown skin that was only a little lighter than her long, dark hair, and a beautiful face, with remarkably large, brown eyes, and a long, sloped nose. She was wearing a beaded blouse and skirt, both made of animal skins. She didn't even look in Alexandra's direction, but was staring intently at Maximilian, with a curious smile that Alexandra found disturbing.

Alexandra noticed that Maximilian was holding his wand at his side. And from his pack, she could hear his Danger Alarm ringing.

“Who is this?” she demanded aloud, drawing her wand and pointing it at the stranger.

The woman leaped backward, as she took notice of Alexandra for the first time.

“Wait, please!” Maximilian pleaded, holding up his empty hand, as the woman began backing rapidly towards the nearest ravine. “We mean you no harm.”

“You have noticed your Danger Alarm is ringing, right?” Alexandra asked, still pointing her wand at the stranger, who had paused in her backward retreat.

“It's been ringing pretty much continuously since yesterday. Bewi says there are Lagaru all around us.”

“Bewi?” Somehow, Alexandra found the mysterious woman more worrisome than 'Lagaru,' whatever they were.

The woman's head jerked back and forth as Maximilian and Alexandra spoke, but her expression when she looked at Alexandra was decidedly unfriendly.

“Bewi, this is my sister, Alexandra.” Maximilian's voice became sharp. “She's young and lacking in manners.”

Alexandra stared at Bewi, who returned her hostile stare with one of her own.

Maximilian cleared his throat. “Alex!” he hissed.

Reluctantly, Alexandra lowered her wand.

Bewi immediately turned her attention back to Maximilian, and smiled. He looked a little bedazzled. Alexandra was fascinated – Bewi's features were striking, and her eyes had a captivating quality.

“You must be very brave, to travel alone through the Lands Below,” Bewi purred.

“He's not alone,” Alexandra interrupted.

“We are looking for those who rule here,” Maximilian told her.

“Rule?” Bewi arched an eyebrow, as if she didn't quite understand the concept.

“We're looking for the Generous Ones,” Alexandra announced.

Maximilian took a deep breath, as Bewi's gaze flickered in Alexandra's direction again.

“It is dangerous to seek the Generous Ones,” the woman said slowly, looking back at Maximilian. She smiled, and sashayed closer to him. Her blouse hung rather loosely on her, and Alexandra could see that she wasn't wearing anything underneath it. Maximilian licked his lips nervously as she fixed her eyes on him and approached, but he didn't back away.

Alexandra pulled open her brother's pack, and held up the buzzing Danger Alarm.

"Turn that off, Alex!" Maximilian snapped. "It doesn't do us much good to know there's danger nearby when it's all around us constantly."

Alexandra slapped the bell on the alarm, silencing it, and watched suspiciously as Bewi laid a hand on Maximilian's chest. She couldn't tell for certain, from where she was standing, but it looked as if the strange woman were giving him a nice view down the front of her blouse.

"Such a handsome man you are," Bewi said softly, leaning towards him.

"Er, thank you." Maximilian put his hand on hers, and gently pulled it away from his chest.

"He's sixteen," Alexandra said.

Bewi didn't look at her this time, but Alexandra saw her eyes flash for a second, before she spoke again. "Little Sister is troublesome and has an irritating voice."

"She is very troublesome," Maximilian agreed.

"Little Sister can hear you, you know," Alexandra said.

"Why are you burdened with her? Traveling with her must be a great trial." Bewi extracted her hand from his.

Maximilian smiled. "You have no idea."

"Really. I'm standing right here," said Alexandra.

Bewi was sidling up against Maximilian again. He looked uncomfortable, but seemed unsure what to do about it.

"Why don't you... send her away?" Bewi whispered, leaning closer.

"I can still hear you." Alexandra was nearly as fascinated as she was appalled by Bewi, but she knew there was something very wrong about this woman.

"Where would I send her?" Maximilian asked. He was subtly shifting away from her, but the beautiful, disturbing woman continued clinging to him, and her lips were almost brushing his ear.

"Send her to fetch water," Bewi breathed.

"You're kidding, right?" Appalled was winning. Alexandra was itching to hex her. "Hello? How about asking her why she's been stalking us?"

"Alex!" Maximilian snapped, as Bewi seemed intent on embracing him. His hands closed on the woman's wrists, holding her at bay. "Go fetch water!"

"What?" Alexandra gasped, in disbelief.

Bewi turned her head towards Alexandra, and her eyes flashed in triumph.

"Remember what I told you!" he barked. "Do as I say!"

"I – you – Fetch water? Are you serious?" Her face turned red with indignation, and she shot daggers at Bewi with her eyes. The doe-eyed beauty was already ignoring her; all of her attention was focused on Maximilian again.

Somehow, Maximilian's words penetrated her outrage. He and Bewi were talking – or rather, he was talking, while Bewi was trying to whisper breathily in his ear, and pawing at him in a way that would make the amorous, PDA-flaunting teenagers at Charmbridge blush. Alexandra clenched her jaw, picked up her broom, and stomped noisily off down the nearest trench branching away from their campsite. As soon as she passed a rock outcropping, she dashed behind it and crouched there, then peeked her head around to spy on her brother and Bewi.

“Why did you not follow me?” Bewi was saying to Maximilian, in a low, throaty voice. She was practically trying to wrap herself around him, or so it seemed to Alexandra.

“I... I didn't know what you wanted,” Maximilian stammered. “And my sister was with me. Who are your people, Bewi?”

Their voices became lower, and Alexandra could no longer hear what they were saying. Maximilian seemed to be trying to converse, while Bewi was relentlessly... Alexandra didn't think 'flirting' was even the word. She was actually rather impressed that Maximilian seemed to be resisting the woman's charms.

Bewi was starting to look annoyed and frustrated, too.

Something skittered behind Alexandra, and she spun around, wand extended. She didn't see anything. She looked at the rocks carefully, and scanned the mini-canyon behind her, and the rocky cliffs lining it.

“Am I not a comely maiden?” Bewi's voice rose a little, sounding both seductive and a trifle impatient. Alexandra, still crouched with her back against the rock that hid her from the couple, turned her head and leaned around it again to peek at them, while still holding her wand pointed in the direction from which she'd heard the sound.

“You are very comely.” Maximilian had cupped Bewi's face in his hands. Alexandra's face screwed up in a grimace. Had they been kissing?

Maximilian was murmuring something to her, but Bewi didn't seem satisfied. Her hand moved somewhere that made Maximilian jump and Alexandra gasp in outrage. Then another noise snapped her head around to stare at the base of the cliff behind her, perhaps twenty feet away. She saw what might have been a little puff of dust, as if something had been disturbed there, like from a pebble falling from above. Her eyes traveled up the rocky face of the short cliff, to the top of the ravine. Fifteen feet up, she could see the edge of the cliff, against the dark grayish-purple that marked the perpetual twilight layer between the floor and the ceiling of the Lands Below.

One could walk up on those cliff tops, looking down at the cracks and fissures and trenches through which Alexandra and Maximilian had been hiking, but staying up there would require being capable of flight, or making prodigious leaps with the sure-footedness of a mountain goat.

Alexandra looked over her shoulder again. Maximilian seemed to be trying to fend off Bewi now. She looked back at the cliff top, and suddenly there were a dozen heads looking over the edge at her.

From where she sat, the faces now staring down at her looked soft and fuzzy. They were white and brown and gray. She saw long ears and bright red eyes.

They were rabbits. Very large rabbits.

Kind of cute, Alexandra thought. She smiled at them.

They all smiled back, baring bloody red mouths full of vicious, needle-sharp teeth.

“MAX!” she screamed, springing to her feet. The fuzzy bunny-heads rose as she did, and she saw many more of them, crowding along the entire length of the ledge overlooking this little part of the trench they were in. Each fuzzy head was attached to a fuzzy body that stood on two legs, and some of them were holding sticks, spears, and other weapons.

She came around the rock outcropping, broom in one hand, wand in the other, and saw Bewi screaming in frustration and anger. Maximilian pushed her away, and the woman lifted her skirt.

It took a split-second for Alexandra to register what she was seeing, because it was so wrong. Bewi's legs were the hairy hindquarters of a deer. Alexandra didn't even have time to shout another warning, before one of those powerful, hooved legs kicked out, and caught Maximilian in the chest. He grunted and went flying.

Alexandra hurled a hex at her, but Bewi had already turned to face her, and jumped aside easily, with a step that covered ten feet in a

single bound. Her next step brought her ten feet closer to Alexandra, eyes enormous and crazed as her hooves struck the ground. Bewi was a rather small woman, barely taller than Alexandra, but with one more step, she'd be close enough to kick the girl's head off.

Alexandra conjured a Choking Cloud between them, directly in Bewi's path. The deer-woman shrieked and leapt straight into the air. When she landed, Alexandra yelled, "Tarantallegra!"

Bewi screamed in outrage as her legs began kicking and jerking about uncontrollably. Alexandra dashed past her and ran to where Maximilian had fallen. He had a visible hoof-shaped indentation in his chest.

"Max!" she cried out.

"Ow," he groaned. "That hurt."

"We need to get out of here now! Bewi is a crazy psycho deer-woman and we're surrounded by killer rabbits!"

He looked at her, dazed, as if she'd been babbling in a foreign tongue. She supposed, given what she'd just said, that she may as well have been.

"Get up!" she screamed, as she saw a horde of small, furry creatures leaping off the cliffs, landing easily on the ground, and hippity-hopping towards them with spears and bows and blowguns. She tried to jerk Maximilian to his feet, but he was too heavy.

"Protego!" she shouted, and her Shield Charm stopped a volley of arrows and darts that came whizzing at them. She yelled, "Defodio!" and caused part of the nearest cliff to collapse, dumping several rabbit-people off the edge and dropping rocks and dirt on those below, and then dashed over to where Maximilian's broom and pack lay. She picked them up and ran back to him. He was struggling to sit up, and he had already scattered some of their attackers with jets of flame from his wand.

As Alexandra returned to his side, he began conjuring snakes by hissing, "Serpensortia!" Large angry serpents went shooting from his wand and landed around them, hissing and rattling, causing the rabbit-people to gnash their teeth and jump out of reach. But more were rushing at them, from all directions.

Alexandra thrust her hand into his backpack, hoping to find Homing Stars or some other weapon. She withdrew a handful of smelly, hard, brown clods, wrapped in bright red paper, with fuses sticking out of them. Grimacing, she pulled every string and flung them in all directions.

"Broom. Get on it!" she commanded, as the dungbombs went off. Maximilian nodded and grabbed his broom.

The rabbits ducked and cringed as flaming brown chunks blew past them, scorching the fur of those who were too close and soiling the rest. Alexandra and Maximilian didn't escape the rain of dung either.

More rabbit-people were surging in their direction. The snakes were speared or shot up with arrows. Alexandra saw Bewi still spinning and leaping about like a deadly, out-of-control ballerina. The rabbits scattered away from her, wherever she landed.

Alexandra tossed more hexes and Maximilian cast a Shield Charm as the two of them lifted off on their brooms. She was holding onto her brother's backpack; it wasn't as light as it looked when he was carrying it. Their tent was still sitting where they'd left it, and was already being trampled by the fuzzy horde.

Maximilian looked a little dizzy, and Alexandra veered close to him, afraid he might tumble off his broom, but he managed to hold on as they ascended away from the ground. An arrow went through his cloak, missing him. A dart bounced off of Alexandra's broomstick. More projectiles came flying at them. A few stones struck her, but without much force. From high above, they could see that there were hundreds of rabbit-people now, dancing and hopping about.

"Lagaru," Maximilian groaned.

“Bats!” Alexandra exclaimed.

“No, I think the Lagaru are the rabbit-”

“Bats!” she shouted, as a cloud of chittering, screeching bats descended on them. They both leaned forward, diving away from the winged swarm. The underground lake Maximilian had spoken of earlier stretched before them, and next to it, a dusty gray plain dotted with rocks and plants that might have been a sort of cactus. Maximilian still looked half-stunned, so Alexandra led this time, veering away from the black lake and towards the flatland beyond the labyrinthine network of trenches and ravines that stretched out behind them, as far as the eye could see. The swarm of bats pursued them, and more kept descending from the cavernous air above, but when they went closer to the ground, the creatures seemed to lose interest, and after a while, the last few stragglers flapping after them fell behind.

They landed at last. Alexandra didn't know how far they'd come, but she didn't think the rabbit-people could catch up to them immediately. Now they were surrounded by what looked like an underground clay desert. The plants she'd initially thought were cacti turned out to be stunted trees. Nothing about this environment made sense. She wondered if Magical Ecology taught anything about the Lands Below. She shook her head, and looked at Maximilian. He slid off his broom and sat down, breathing heavily.

She knelt next to him, and opened his pack. “You should take off your shirt,” she ordered, looking for Bruise-Healing Paste and Fudd's Grow-All, hoping that Bewi's kick hadn't actually broken any bones. “What the heck were you thinking? What happened to 'Nothing is what it seems, and everything will try to kill us'?”

“You forgot, 'Be polite to everyone we meet.'”

“Even people who might turn out to be crazy half-human monsters who want to kill us?”

“Especially people who might turn out to be crazy half-human monsters who want to kill us.”

He pulled off his cloak, unbuttoned his jacket, and pulled his shirt up. In the center of his chest was a large, angry red and purple bruise, swelling and spreading even as Alexandra examined it.

"You think it might have cracked the bone?" she asked.

"I'd better drink a little Fudd's just in case." He grimaced. Alexandra remembered how awful that stuff tasted, and how much it hurt as the bones mended.

She began spreading some of the Bruise-Healing Paste on his bare chest with her fingertips. "I'd be the envy of half the girls at Charmbridge right now," she joked, as she tried to cover all of his discolored skin with the paste.

"Half, huh?" He took a swallow from the bottle of Fudd's Grow-All. He hacked and coughed.

"The other half are lusting after Martin." She shook her head. "Why did you play along with Bewi? I mean, it was totally obvious she was nuts. You weren't really planning to... you know, do anything with her...?"

"Of course not!" Maximilian wiped his mouth, with a look of disgust. "But I wanted to find out what she was about."

"I thought it was pretty obvious what she was about," Alexandra muttered.

"She knew about the Generous Ones, and the Lagaru. I could have gotten her to tell me more."

"With your incredible powers of seduction? Before or after she got your clothes off and then stomped you to death and fed you to a bunch of killer rabbits?"

"Enough, Alex." He winced as she started pressing Healing Patches on his chest for good measure. He pushed her hands away and

yanked his shirt down. "Don't use up all the patches. I'll try a spell to finish the job."

She looked around, at their surroundings, while he waved a wand over himself and muttered one of the basic first aid charms they'd learned in JROC. Although it did look like it would be easier hiking now, there was still no indication of which way to go.

"You sent me away," she complained. "That was really stupid."

He smiled. "As if I thought you'd actually go anywhere. You kept a lookout, as I wanted you to."

"Bewi probably led the Lagaru to us."

"Probably."

"So did you learn anything?"

Maximilian stood up, hissing as he took a deep breath. "Yes. I'll never eat venison again."

Alexandra looked at her brother with concern, but he patted her on the shoulder, leaning on her a little.

"You stink," she commented, flicking a piece of burnt dung off of his sleeve.

"You don't exactly smell like roses."

She grimaced, and ran a hand through her hair. No, she could definitely use a bath herself. "Which way now?"

The excitement of the last hour had made her forget about Charlie, but now she was reminded of their situation: lost, wandering aimlessly, and with her familiar possibly gone forever. And now Maximilian was injured, and they had no tent. And they smelled like manure. She began to feel the same sense of gloom that had weighed her down the previous day depressing her again.

And as if summoned by her thoughts, they heard a caw, resounding clearly across the somber gray landscape.

Alexandra looked up, and cried out with glee. Flying just a little higher than the highest of the stunted trees surrounding them, a familiar black raven was winging its way towards them, with no sign of bats in pursuit.

“Charlie!” Alexandra dropped her broom and held out her hands.

“Alexandra!” Charlie's wings spread and almost covered her face as the raven dropped something in her outstretched hands, and then settled on her right arm, talons gripping her sleeve. Alexandra pulled the raven to her breast and wrapped her other arm around her familiar, nuzzling the bird's head with her cheek. She felt hot tears spilling from her eyes, and tried not to look at Maximilian.

“You came back,” she whispered.

“Alexandra,” Charlie cooed.

Charlie seemed a little scrawnier than when she'd sent the bird off. “Are you hungry, Charlie?” As the raven clacked and squawked emphatically, she dug into her pockets and fed the raven the last of her owl treats.

Maximilian, after waiting patiently through Alexandra's reunion with her familiar, inquired, “What's that?”

Alexandra finally looked at the object Charlie had dropped into her hands. She sat down, letting Charlie remain balanced on her right arm, and examined it.

“A bone?” Maximilian frowned, for it did indeed appear to be a bone – smooth, polished, and white, about six inches long. Its shape was just a little bit irregular. Alexandra couldn't guess what sort of being the bone had come from, or what part of the body,

She held it up for closer inspection, and realized it wasn't just a bone. “It's a flute!”

The bone had been hollowed out from end to end, and there were holes drilled along its length; four in all. A few grooves were carved into it; they appeared purely decorative, though they made no pattern she could discern.

It was a strange, primitive work of art. She looked into the black eyes of her raven, who said nothing, and then at the bone flute again. She lifted it to her mouth.

“Alex!” Maximilian's sharp voice made Charlie squawk and flutter to her shoulder. Alexandra paused.

Maximilian gave her a weary, exasperated look. “Just out of curiosity,” he asked mildly, “did any thought at all go through your head before you decided to stick that thing in your mouth and blow on it? Like the possibility that a bone flute from Merlin-knows-where might be cursed?”

She glared at him. “Charlie wouldn't bring me something cursed.”

“Yes, I can see how you'd trust Charlie's judgment. Ravens have such discriminating taste in bones and shiny things.”

Charlie screeched. Alexandra petted the raven, and glowered at her brother.

“I doubt Charlie just found it lying around. Why would the Generous Ones send us a cursed gift?”

Maximilian looked annoyed, but she held up the flute and kept talking. “I sent Charlie to bring back a gift. Here it is. So what do you think we should do with it? Oh, I know – let's put it in your pack, to bring back as a souvenir. Then we can just keep walking in a random direction and hope we find someone else helpful to tell us where to go, like Bewi.”

Her brother's eyes flashed dangerously, but Alexandra held his gaze, while Charlie sat quietly on her shoulder.

"At least let me check it for curses," he said at last.

"Be my guest." She handed it to him.

He held up his wand, and began running through all the spells he knew to detect Dark magic, as well as examining it through a lens he took out of his backpack, and even poured a few drops from a potion vial on the bone flute.

"Can't detect any curses or other Dark magic," he admitted, finally. "But that doesn't mean there aren't any." He looked at Alexandra, and suddenly brought it to his lips.

"No!" she yelled. She lunged and snatched it out of his hand.

He tried to snatch it back. Charlie cawed angrily as Alexandra held the flute away from her brother. He reached past her, nearly knocked her down, and then loomed over her, while she held her arm extended behind her, trying to keep the flute out of his reach. His arms were longer, but before he could seize the flute again, Charlie flew at his face, cawing and clawing, and Maximilian staggered back, covering his face with his hands to fend off the raven. "Argh! Damn it!"

"Charlie!" Alexandra snapped her fingers.

"Jerk!" Charlie responded, and returned to her shoulder. Maximilian looked furious. She was afraid he might use his wand on the raven, and she hastily stepped in front of him, turning to put herself between him and the bird.

"Charlie brought the flute to me," she said. "If there's any danger, it's my risk to take."

He shook his head, but she continued speaking, in a softer tone. "If something happens to me, you might be able to save me. What will I do if something happens to you?"

He paused, looking frustrated and helpless.

“You don't really have any better ideas, do you?” she asked quietly.

He made a face, then slowly shook his head.

She nodded, and brought the flute to her lips, holding it with both hands now. She took a breath and blew.

She had never played any sort of musical instrument. She put her fingers over a couple of holes, and a long, melancholy note came out of the flute. She moved her fingers, covering one hole and uncovering another, and the flute continued to issue a haunting, eerie sound. She closed her eyes, doing her best to produce something resembling a melody, but it was all clumsy, atonal noise.

After a minute of this, she had produced only a sequence of random notes. She lowered the flute, disappointed. She would almost rather have been struck by a curse – at least then, they'd have known that there was a point to all this fuss.

She opened her eyes and looked at her brother, but he was looking over her shoulder.

“Alex,” he said, in a tight voice.

She turned around, and realized they were no longer standing on the flat desert plain. They were on top of a mountain.

The sky overhead was the same endless darkness, and in every direction, the horizon was the same murky, purple haze. She knew they were still in the Lands Below, though it couldn't be anywhere within sight of where they had been. There were other reddish brown mountains and canyons and rocky spires surrounding them, and far, far down, at the base of these barren, unnaturally angular mountains, were caverns, yawning like entrances into even deeper realms.

Behind Maximilian was a precipice that could send either of them tumbling to their deaths with a careless step. But behind Alexandra, ringing them in a semi-circle on the mountain top, were at least twenty small, half-naked creatures with wrinkled skin like brown paper, and large, bulbous eyes. Their chests and arms were bare, for the

most part, though a few had animal skin vests, or necklaces of feathers and bone beads, crystals and gems, or long furry tails. They wore strips of fur and leather as loincloths, and a few wore thick sandals, though most were barefoot. Some held carved wooden sticks – Alexandra might have called them 'wands,' except they didn't really look like wizards' wands. She saw one with a pair of what appeared to be rabbit skulls, hanging from his waist.

“Greetings,” Maximilian said, speaking slowly. “I am Maximilian King.” He opened his hands, and nodded towards Alexandra. “This is my sister, Alexandra Quick. We come in peace.”

The small humanoids all regarded them silently, blinking one by one. Then one of them replied: “Greetings, Maximilian King and Alexandra Quick.” His voice sounded dry and papery, like his skin. “I am Tiow. We are the Generous Ones.”

The Generous Ones, Alexandra thought, looked very much like elves.

Tiow smiled, eyes gleaming. “You accepted our gift.” The Generous One nodded solemnly towards Alexandra, who was still holding the bone flute. “So, you must also accept our hospitality.”

The Generous Ones

There were many more Generous Ones in addition to the score who greeted them on the mountain top. Alexandra could see them watching from nearby mountains, or moving about on the trails and ledges below. Like house-elves, they seemed able to Apparate at will. Half of their greeting party had disappeared after their initial reception. After accepting Tiow's offer of hospitality, Maximilian had announced that he also had gifts to offer – which came as a surprise to Alexandra. She gave her brother a narrow look, but for once, held her tongue.

Now the two of them were following Tiow and the rest down an almost nonexistent trail that wound around the mountain. The Generous Ones walked easily on the narrow ledge, but it was a dizzying height with no room for a misstep for humans. Alexandra and Maximilian kept their hands on their brooms and avoided looking down.

None of the Generous Ones appeared to be armed, except perhaps for the wooden sticks a few carried in their hands. If they had elf-like powers, though, Alexandra wondered why they would need wands.

“Did they give you the flute, Charlie?” she whispered. She had tucked the flute back into a pocket of her cloak, next to her wand. The raven, sitting on her shoulder, made a trilling sound, a bit like a flute, and the Generous Ones stared in surprise for a moment.

The mountain wasn't really a very big one, but as Alexandra had little experience with mountains, aside from the small one that the Charmbridge bus ascended to reach the Invisible Bridge, it seemed quite large to her. The hike down the precarious winding path took a long time. She was relieved when they reached a valley at its base, though she wasn't sure what to make of the large gathering of Generous Ones waiting for them – over a hundred, easily.

She saw a single domed building made of clay, with smoke coming from a hole in the center of its roof. Not far off, there was a large, carved totem pole, rising high above the building, but Alexandra couldn't make out its details. This didn't look like a village – just a

way-station, perhaps, or a meeting place of some sort. Certainly all these beings couldn't live here, not unless their homes were underground, the entrances invisible.

A very, very old individual, with skin that was nearly the color of the mountains around them, draped in a much fancier beaded vest and belt than any of the other Generous Ones, hobbled towards them, and met them at the base of the trail they had just descended.

"I am Cejaiaqui," he wheezed. "To whom the years have been most generous."

Maximilian paused, unsure how to respond, though Cejaiaqui's formal greeting seemed to call for some similar declaration.

"I am Maximilian King," he announced, drawing himself up to his full height, and speaking in a tone that Alexandra would have found pompous under other circumstances. "But I greet you in my father's name, as Maximilian Thorn."

If he'd been hoping that that name would elicit some kind of reaction from the Generous Ones, he was disappointed. They simply nodded. Maximilian looked at Alexandra. "This is my little sister, Alexandra Thorn."

She bristled a little, but kept her mouth shut. She would have preferred to speak for herself, she didn't like being called, 'little sister,' and she wasn't sure how she felt about being introduced by her father's name. She knew Maximilian was trying to sound very serious and important, but she doubted he knew any better than she did how impressed the Generous Ones would be by his protocols.

"You have traveled far, and it has been long, long, since a wizard not bearing the Seal of the Confederation visited us." Cejaiaqui squinted at them. "You are both young, even as humans count years, if I am not mistaken."

Maximilian nodded. "We are, but our business is serious."

“Business?” Cejaiaqui chuckled. “Always your people wish to speak of 'business.' Please, accept refreshment, and we shall discuss your 'business' afterwards.”

Maximilian paused. He and Alexandra exchanged looks. She remembered his warning about eating or drinking in the Lands Below.

“We do not wish to impose on your hospitality,” he answered carefully.

There was a murmur among the Generous Ones. Cejaiaqui's eyes narrowed.

“Surely you will not refuse it,” he replied slowly. “It is a poor guest who comes to the Lands Below and declines our generosity.”

Maximilian cleared his throat. Alexandra looked around; the elf-like creatures were all staring at them intently.

“We accept your hospitality gratefully,” Maximilian said. “But my sister cannot partake of your refreshments.”

Alexandra jerked her head in his direction, while the leader of the Generous Ones looked puzzled.

“She's a girl,” her brother explained. “Girls are required to eat in private.” He glanced at her. “They're also required to remain silent in public.”

Alexandra felt her face turning red. Charlie squawked, while Cejaiaqui squinted again, and scratched his pointed chin. “None of your people have mentioned that custom before.”

“My family is very, very traditional,” Maximilian replied.

And you are very, very dead, Alexandra thought.

Cejaiaqui studied the two humans, his face unreadable. “I see,” he responded at last. He nodded. “Very well. We will make your sister as comfortable as your customs allow.” He gestured for them to enter the domed building, and Maximilian walked ahead of Alexandra. He

didn't look back, but she hoped he could feel the daggers she was shooting into his back with her eyes.

The clay meeting house was much larger on the inside than it appeared from without, but Alexandra couldn't tell as they entered whether it was a trick of perspective, or a feat of magic, like their lost tent and the Charmbridge library. As she and Maximilian sat down in front of a large fire pit, Cejaiaqui sat across from them, and other particularly wizened-looking elves sat on either side of him. Many more crowded into the dome; scores of them, surrounding them on all sides.

The Generous Ones were mostly unclothed, but what they did wear was obviously crafted with care: vests, belts, loincloths, necklaces, bracelets, here and there earrings and headbands, and dresses on a few whom Alexandra assumed were female. Their garments were made of hides and fur, their accessories of polished bone and rock, gems, and bits of precious metal.

A low hum filled the space even before she and Maximilian entered, and it became louder as more of the Generous Ones joined them. Alexandra realized after a while that some of them, mostly those sitting or standing around the edges, by the walls, were humming and chanting in low voices. It was a strange sound that seemed to reverberate in her breastbone and down her spine.

Not all of them were exclusively paying attention to their human guests; some Generous Ones greeted one another with what appeared to be ritualized exchanges of gifts, ranging from beaded garments and jewelry to carved wooden sticks, sharpened stone knives, polished skulls, skins full of liquid, and sacks with things Alexandra knew not what inside. Every offer of a gift resulted in the receiver offering something else in return, back and forth, sometimes as many as a dozen times in one exchange.

Confused, Alexandra and Maximilian sat in the center of the hubbub, as elves (she was sure now that they were elves, or at least some kin to the house-elves of Charmbridge and Croatoa) brought Maximilian cornmeal cakes, fried bread, some sort of jerky and berry mixture, and – Alexandra gulped – cooked snakes and scorpions, of the giant

variety they had seen earlier. They also poured some sort of hot black liquid, which looked like tea but had a fruity smell that was completely unlike either tea or coffee, into a stone bowl for Maximilian to drink.

Maximilian accepted these offerings, and ate and drank, while the Generous Ones watched him intently. Alexandra fumed – not just because she was hungry herself (even the sight of a smoking lobster-sized scorpion did not make her stomach stop growling), but also because she knew he was violating one of the first warnings he'd given her, and he probably had no better idea than she did what the consequences might be.

There was nothing in the center of the pit but a flaming hide of some sort – Alexandra might have guessed buffalo or bear, because it was large and brown and furry, but they hadn't seen any buffalo or bears down here yet. It was obviously magical, because whatever it was was not consumed by the flames, and the fire never went out.

Aside from the food, none of the Generous Ones offered her or Maximilian anything. The two of them still smelled of smoke and burnt dung, though they had both tried to remove the worst of the stench with Scouring Charms on their clothes, but if their hosts noticed, they didn't say anything about it. Alexandra really hoped they'd offer somewhere to bathe later.

The feast went on for a long time, and Alexandra felt her legs going to sleep, while she grew hungrier and hungrier, and more cranky, sitting next to her brother watching him eat. Charlie fluttered to one of the plates holding the corn cakes and began nibbling on them. Alexandra hissed in alarm, and stared from the raven to her brother, wondering if Charlie, too, would be cursed in some way by eating down here. But her familiar had been gone for two days, and must have eaten during that time also. The elves pointed and laughed as the raven fed, and did not seem offended.

The Generous Ones spoke to one another in their own language, and none of them addressed the two humans. At long last, though, Cejaiaqui spoke aloud in English.

“Have you had your fill of our food?” he asked. Around him, voices stilled, though the meeting house did not become quiet; some elves were still talking to one another, though now in whispers or low voices. Most of those nearer to the fire, though, fell silent.

Maximilian nodded. “It was excellent, and more than enough.”

He hadn't made a face at anything served to him. Alexandra, by now, was hungry enough that she wouldn't have turned down snakes or scorpions.

“We are pleased that you have accepted our generosity,” Cejaiaqui intoned gravely.

Maximilian nodded again. “I also have gifts for you.”

Another murmur went through the gathering of elves.

“Indeed?” Cejaiaqui didn't have eyebrows, but his forehead rippled as his eyes widened slightly.

Maximilian rose, and reached into his pack, to withdraw a carefully wrapped bundle. He walked around the fire pit, to kneel before the leader of the Generous Ones.

“I bring gifts from my father, Abraham Thorn.” He laid down pieces of wood, ranging in size from small sticks to several that looked very much like unfinished wands, a pile of pressed leaves spilling out of a cloth sack, and a leather purse that jingled noisily.

“Cedar and sage,” said Maximilian. “Juniper and pine. And willow, yew, and rowan, from the Old World, cut and crafted according to the ways of our people.” He indicated the two bags. “Wizard tobacco, and goblin gold. Tokens of my father's regard. And... and generosity.”

The Generous Ones looked impressed, but for some reason, Cejaiaqui did not sound entirely pleased when he responded, “Generous gifts indeed.” One of the other elves brought the bag of wizard-tobacco to him, and he withdrew a leaf, rolled it between his fingers, and held it to his wrinkled knot-like nose, inhaling deeply and

closing his eyes. Meanwhile, the other wizened elves at his side passed around the gold coins.

“Of course you have seen only the smallest portion of our generosity,” Cejaiaqui announced. “Do not think we are done bestowing gifts upon you! But if these gifts are from your father, we must know how we can return his generosity.”

Maximilian smiled. “There is only one thing that he desires, for which you can ask any gift within his power to give.”

Cejaiaqui open his mouth to respond, but Maximilian continued speaking, and the ancient elf closed his mouth. Another murmur went through the assembly. Alexandra thought perhaps Maximilian was being too abrupt, but she stifled her impulse to say something.

“My father wishes to be able to come and go, to and from the Lands Below. He desires the gift you have given the wizards of the Confederation,” Maximilian said.

The conversations around the room didn't all cease at once, but the elves nearest the fire fell silent immediately, and then others began whispering in the ears of their neighbors, and as word spread (Alexandra thought that some elves were translating, and not all of the Generous Ones understood English), even the chanting and humming of the singers came to a halt. Maximilian and Alexandra now had the undivided attention of every elf in the chamber.

“Your father sent his son to ask for this thing?” Cejaiaqui demanded, in that creaky, dry voice.

Maximilian nodded. “He could not come, because all entrances we know of are sealed and guarded. But if you grant him right of entry, he will treat with you himself.”

Cejaiaqui leaned towards his neighbor, and they began whispering to each other. The other elf elders were also murmuring to one another. Maximilian sat impassively, trying not to look nervous.

“And your father sent his daughter also, for this?” Cejaiaqui nodded towards Alexandra.

Alexandra frowned, while Maximilian hesitated, and then he answered, “Although she is young, she can be useful, and my father did not want to send me alone.”

It was all she could do not to say anything. The elves were all giving her unnerving looks now. Some of them were whispering to one another and shaking their heads.

“What your father desires, Maximilian Thorn, son of Abraham Thorn, is something we, the Generous Ones, can give, and by the stars above, none are more generous than we! But though we know it is the way of wizards to hurry, hurry, hurry –” Cejaiaqui made a gesture with his hand, as of a multi-legged creature scurrying through the air, and some of the other elves laughed; “– surely after a long and dangerous journey, you are tired, and we would hear your tale and offer you more gifts after you have had a rest.”

And a bath, thought Alexandra hopefully.

“And perhaps a bath,” Cejaiaqui added.

Maximilian nodded. “We thank you for your generosity.”

There was something a little unsettling about the way Cejaiaqui and his companions smiled at that, particularly when they looked at Alexandra, but abruptly, all the Generous Ones were talking again, and as conversation once more filled the room, several elves appeared at her and Maximilian's sides. Charlie fluttered to her shoulder and made agitated sounds, until she shushed the bird and looked at Maximilian questioningly.

“Where are you taking us?” Maximilian asked. “We, er, we'd rather not be separated.” Two different groups of elves seemed to be trying to pull them apart.

“Not far,” replied one elf. “Not far. Do you wish to bathe with your sister?”

“No,” Alexandra said hurriedly. Maximilian flushed. Then he reached into his pack, and pressed two more MRM cans and a bottle of water into her hands.

“Eat,” he murmured, “but don't accept any food or drink from them.”

The Generous Ones at his side heard this, and didn't look happy, but Alexandra nodded.

“Come with Siatani, human child,” coaxed one elf, whose voice was so high-pitched that Alexandra thought she was female, though she was wearing only a loincloth and several strings of shiny pebbles around her neck, and did not really look any different from the male elves.

She thought Siatani meant outside, and stepped towards the door they had come in through, but instead, she suddenly felt herself squeezed and compressed, as everything went black for an instant, and then she fell to her knees on a thick, fur carpet, and saw she was in a much smaller room, with clay walls and another fire. There was a large woven basket by the wall, with more furs in it – it reminded her of a human-sized bassinet for kittens or puppies. It did look very comfortable.

Charlie screeched. She reached up and stroked the raven's feathers. “Shh. Are you all right, Charlie?”

The raven chirped, a little weakly.

Besides Siatani, two other elves had accompanied them here. One was wearing a snakeskin dress, while the third, to Alexandra's surprise, wore what was obviously the remains of a discarded denim jacket, with brass buttons. It hung like a baggy, overly large robe on the small creature, and Alexandra thought this elf did not look like the other Generous Ones.

“Does Miss want a bath?” asked the elf in the denim jacket.

"Yes, please," she replied, "but where's my brother?" She set down her broom, and stood up.

"Not far, not far," the elf in the snakeskin dress assured her. Alexandra looked at the elf in denim, who snapped his fingers. To her amazement, a ceramic bathtub, complete with water faucets, materialized before her.

"You – you're an elf, aren't you?" she asked. "Er, I mean, I think you all are –" She looked around at the trio who had apparently been appointed as her attendants, and hoped she could manage not to offend them. They just blinked at her. She turned back to the first one. "But you're... different, from the other Generous Ones."

Besides wearing the remains of a Muggle jacket, this elf's skin was lighter, and one ear was longer and more bat-like, like those of the elves she had seen in the wizarding world.

The other ear, though, looked as though it had been torn off.

"Quimley is not one of the Generous Ones," the elf admitted, bowing his head.

"You came from the Lands Above, didn't you? From the wizarding world?" Alexandra noticed that Siatani and the other elf were both looking at Quimley with disdain,

Quimley nodded. "Once, Quimley was a house-elf and served wizards."

"If you desire anything else, human child, Quimley shall attend to you," said Siatani.

Quimley had not once looked her in the eye, and looking down at the top of the former house-elf's bare head, Alexandra now realized that the pale skin was covered with scar tissue.

"Does Miss wish to bathe now?" asked Quimley. Without waiting for an answer, the elf in the snakeskin dress rubbed her palms together, and water began magically filling the tub. Steam rose from the

surface of the water. A shiver went through Alexandra; it looked so inviting.

“Take off your clothes, human child,” Siatani instructed.

Alexandra stammered. “I... that's not necessary... I mean, I can bathe by myself.”

She still wasn't keen on having attendants while bathing – and she was pretty sure that Quimley was a boy-elf!

Siatani looked irritated. “As you wish. We will bring you new clothes.” A gleam came into her eye. “A gift, from us.”

She turned away, clapped, and disappeared. The elf in the snakeskin dress did, too.

“Do you like it here, Quimley?” Alexandra asked abruptly.

Quimley paused – he had been about to disappear, too. He turned his head, so he could regard her from beneath lowered eyelids.

“The Generous Ones is generous with Quimley,” he replied. “Quimley will never leave. Quimley cannot go back to live with wizards.”

“I'm sorry,” she said quietly.

“Sorry?” Quimley looked surprised.

“Wizards... did they mistreat you?”

Quimley trembled a little. “Quimley does not say bad things.” He shook his head, and trembled more. “Quimley is a good elf!”

“I'm sure you are.” She looked down, and kicked the toe of her boot against the clay floor. “I'm not sure I've been a good witch.”

Quimley shuddered so violently, Alexandra hastily amended: “I try to be! I just meant... I have house-elf friends, back at Charmbridge. But I think I haven't always been as nice to them as I should have.”

“Friends,” Quimley repeated, with an odd expression.

“When I get back,” she vowed, “I’m going to do better. And I’m going to make my father do something about house-elves being mistreated.”

“Miss’s father?” Quimley now looked even more confused.

“Abraham Thorn. He’s a really powerful wizard. And he owes me a boon.” Alexandra’s voice was determined, but Quimley gaped in astonishment.

“Miss’s father is Abraham Thorn?” he gasped.

“You’ve heard of him?” She sighed. “I know everyone says he’s Dark, but I’m not Dark, honest, and neither is my brother –”

“Abraham Thorn helped pass the House-Elf Protection Act,” Quimley murmured.

Now Alexandra was the one who blinked in astonishment. “You know about that?”

“Quimley... Quimley heard,” mumbled the elf, looking down. “Quimley’s... masters... they did not like Abraham Thorn...” And then with a little moan, he disappeared.

Alexandra stared at the empty space where Quimley had just stood, and then looked at Charlie, who was now perched on the edge of the bathtub.

“That’s not a birdbath, Charlie,” she scolded, as she took out her wand, the bone flute, her locket, and everything else that was in her pockets, and set it all on the rim of the tub, next to the non-functional faucets, where she also found a rough bar of soap.

She stripped off her soiled clothes. Wrinkling her nose, she dumped them all in a pile on the other side of the room, and then dashed back to the tub, because inside this chamber – wherever they were – the

air was cold on her bare skin. She considered the MRMs she had set next to the tub, and her stomach rumbled noisily, so she picked up one can, and then dipped a toe into the bathwater.

It was nice and hot; nearly the perfect temperature. She smiled as she stepped in and slowly lowered herself into the water. She stretched out with a sigh, and grabbed the bar of soap.

Charlie was trying to balance so as to dip a beak into the water. Alexandra raised a foot and splashed the raven with her toes. Charlie screeched indignantly, and fluttered over to the bassinet.

“Troublesome!” the raven complained, while Alexandra laughed.

She scrubbed herself with the soap, and dunked her head underwater so she could lather and wash her hair as well.

“Oh, my God, that feels good, Charlie,” she groaned, stretching out in the warm water of the tub.

“Jerk!” Charlie exclaimed.

“Don't sulk, Charlie.” She sat up in the tub, and opened her Magically-Ready Meal. “Here.” She offered the raven a handful of crackers, the first thing she found in the can, while she drank some water from the bottle Maximilian had given her. Charlie fluttered back to her, and sat on edge of the tub to peck at the crackers.

Alexandra also found pretzels, sausage, and very hard cheese inside the MRM. She finished this off quickly, and was about to see what might be left, when she heard a pop, and then Charlie squawked in alarm.

“Miss?” whispered Quimley. Alexandra jumped, and then immediately sputtered and covered herself with her hands, dropping the MRM can as she sank into the water, submerging herself to her chin.

“Quimley!” she exclaimed. Quimley, in his old, worn denim jacket, was standing next to the tub, staring at his feet. Then Charlie angrily dived at the elf, who raised his hands to protect his face.

“Charlie, stop!” Alexandra cried. “Stop it!” She was already reaching for her wand, and then the elf disappeared.

“Please, Miss,” Quimley whispered, from the other side of the tub. Alexandra coughed and flipped around to face the elf again, still trying to stay completely underwater.

“Quimley!” she hissed. “I’m taking a bath!”

She knew elves were probably about as interested in naked humans as she was in naked elves, but she could still feel a flush rising to her skin, all over.

“Miss should not accept the Generous Ones’ gifts,” Quimley whispered.

“What?” She paused, curiosity and worry replacing embarrassment. She set her wand down, and held up a hand, as Charlie was fluttering in circles and looked ready to dive at the elf again. The raven landed on the back of her hand instead.

The elf looked wide-eyed and apprehensive. “The Generous Ones’ gifts is not gifts,” he whispered. “Every gift you accepts from them, gives them power over you.”

Alexandra’s eyes drifted over to the bone flute, sitting next to her wand. “But we’ve accepted their hospitality... and a bath... and that flute...”

Quimley nodded gravely. “Unless Miss and her brother gives back better gifts, human children will not leave the Lands Below.”

She swallowed. Maximilian’s gifts, of gold and tobacco and wands – she wondered what their worth was, balanced against what they had received.

“Siatani and Lialuco will offer Miss new clothes,” Quimley murmured.

“So I shouldn't accept them?” She turned her head, to look at the pile of dirty laundry she'd dumped on the other side of the room. She dreaded putting those grimy, dung-stained clothes back on.

“Quimley will wash Miss's clothes.”

She looked at the little elf, with the missing ear and the scarred scalp. “You don't have to do that, Quimley. You've already done me a huge favor. I'll figure out how to clean my clothes myself.”

She could wash them in the tub, she thought, and then try a Drying Charm. They might still be damp, and not entirely clean, but it was better than making the elf do her laundry.

“Dirty!” squawked Charlie. Alexandra glared and almost dumped the raven into the bathwater.

Quimley still didn't look at her, but the elf smiled, a little.

“Quimley is not a house-elf anymore,” he said softly. “Quimley does this for Miss as a gift. But Quimley hopes Miss will be generous to her house-elf friends.”

“Thank you,” she said, in a small voice, as the elf walked over to her soiled clothes. “Quimley?”

The elf paused, and looked in her direction again, without looking at her.

“What... what did the Generous Ones give you, that made you have to stay here?”

Quimley didn't answer at first. He slowly and quietly gathered up the smelly garments, without even wrinkling his nose. Finally, he stood up, holding her clothes, and spoke so quietly, she had to lean forward to hear him.

“Quimley is here because of what Quimley gave the Generous Ones,” he replied. His voice shook. “Quimley gave them the most terrible gift.”

She blinked, confused. She didn't understand that at all, but the elf clearly didn't want to talk about it – in fact, she suspected he was only replying at all because he was used to answering any questions witches and wizards asked.

“Are you going to get in trouble, Quimley?” she asked.

“It would be better if Miss doesn't tell the Generous Ones what Quimley has said to her,” he replied, still looking down.

“I won't,” she promised.

He nodded, and disappeared with a pop. Alexandra closed her eyes and pressed her forehead against the edge of the tub, wondering what the cost of the 'gift' their father had asked for would be.

Siatani and Lialuco returned not long after Quimley left, with a soft, beautiful, doeskin dress, a hair band, beads and feathers to tie in her hair, thick leather boots, and armfuls of bracelets and necklaces and other jewelry.

“Thank you,” Alexandra said carefully, “but I already have clothes.”

Unfortunately, she wasn't wearing any right now. Finding no towels, she had used one of the furs in the large woven basket to dry off, and now she was sitting in that basket, with something gray and scratchy wrapped around herself, while the two Generous Ones presented their gifts to her.

“Surely you would prefer clean, new clothes, human child,” Siatani urged.

“Surely you will not refuse our gifts,” coaxed Lialuco, the one wearing a snakeskin dress.

Alexandra was angry – if she accepted, the Generous Ones would put her in their power. If she refused, she was being rude. Their sly smiles and eagerness to shower her and Maximilian with 'hospitality'

had taken on a whole new significance, but she knew she didn't dare tell them what she really thought of their 'generosity.'

"Quimley is washing my clothes. You said he'd attend to anything else I wanted."

Siatani and Lialuco looked at one another, their large eyes narrowing a little.

"Of course," Siatani replied pleasantly. "As a witch, you are more comfortable being served by Quimley's kind."

Alexandra bit her tongue.

"Are you sure we cannot bring you food? Black tea or berry juice, corn cakes, fry bread, cooked fish or juicy bugs," Lialuco offered.

"No, thank you," Alexandra replied firmly. "I'll just wait for Quimley to bring me back my clothes, and then I want to see my brother."

The two elves' faces hardened, just a little.

"Very well," Siatani replied. She and Lialuco both clapped, and disappeared.

The basket full of furs was very comfortable, and Alexandra wasn't aware she'd fallen asleep until Charlie cawed again.

She opened her eyes, to find herself staring at Quimley. The ex-house-elf was standing there, holding her clothes, cleaned and neatly folded.

"Quimley is sorry to wake up Miss," he apologized. Apparently old habits died hard.

Alexandra hurriedly checked to make sure she was still completely wrapped in the furs, and then nodded. "Thank you, Quimley. Really, thank you. I meant everything I said."

"Quimley believes Miss."

She took a deep breath. "One more thing. Do you know where my brother is, and what the Generous Ones are planning? I mean, about keeping us apart, or bringing us both back to that meeting place?"

Quimley shook his head. "Quimley thinks the Generous Ones will come for both children soon, but Abraham Thorn's son is in the house next to this one. Miss can step outside and see it."

Feeling foolish, she nodded. "Thank you," she said again, sincerely. "I have to get dressed now, Quimley."

She hoped the elf would take the hint, and he did. He bowed his head, and disappeared with a pop. She immediately leaped out of the basket, and put her clothes on. She put her father's locket back around her neck, her charm bracelet around her wrist, the bone flute in her pocket, and grabbed her broom and her wand.

"Come on, Charlie," she commanded. Charlie returned to her shoulder, as she marched out the door.

Outside, it was dark. Very dark. She craned her head up, and saw that they were at the bottom of a deep, deep chasm. Nearly vertical cliffs rose on either side of them, and with only a fraction of the dim light that suffused the Lands Below reaching down to where she stood, it was darker than a moonless night.

It was an exceedingly strange, dark place to put two clay guest-houses, but sitting side by side were two domes much like the one they had met the Generous Ones in, only smaller. As far as Alexandra could tell, there were no other dwellings nearby, and she couldn't imagine why anyone would want to live in such a dark, inaccessible location.

Reflecting that trying to make sense of things down here usually turned out to be futile, she walked to the other dome. Like hers, the entrance consisted of a large hide flap hanging over the doorway.

"Max?" she called out. "Are you in there? And dressed, hopefully?"

“Alexandra?” Maximilian responded. A moment later, he threw aside the hide covering the entrance. “How did you get here?” He looked relieved, and for a moment, she almost thought he was going to hug her.

“Right next door.” She jerked a thumb over her shoulder. Maximilian got a funny expression on his face when he saw, as she had, that their respective quarters had been next to each other all along.

Then her eyes widened, when she saw that under his cloak, he was wearing a jacket and pants made of buckskin, decorated with both paint and glass beads.

“They gave you clothes,” she groaned.

“I couldn't exactly refuse, could I?” He blinked at her clean clothes. “They didn't offer you any? I half-expected to see you again dressed like an Indian princess.”

She pushed her way inside, forcing her startled brother back into the dwelling with her. “Are any of them here?” she demanded, looking around.

“They said they'd let me know when you were ready, and we could rest in the meantime, but I didn't much feel like taking a nap —”

“Max!” she cut him off, turning to face him. “We can't accept any more gifts from the Generous Ones!” Quickly, she told him what Quimley had told her.

He grimaced. “That's going to make it difficult to negotiate.”

“Difficult? You can't negotiate with them! We're in over our heads! We've made contact — just tell them that our father wants to seal the deal, and let him come down here and figure out how to exchange 'gifts' with these sneaky little —”

“Our father can't come down here unless we bring him back the means to do so.”

“Well then, we tell him tough luck, he'll have to figure out another way. Let him find an obol!”

Maximilian took a deep breath. “And how are we going to tell him that if we can't get back? We have no choice, Alex. Somehow, we have to give the Generous Ones something that's worth our freedom, or promise them something that Father can give them.”

She ran her hands through her hair. “I hope you've got a lot more gifts in your pack.”

He looked worried, and then there was a pop. Three Generous Ones appeared behind Maximilian; two Alexandra didn't recognize, but the third was Siatani.

“There you are, human child,” said Siatani. “Good, good, you have found your brother.” Her expression didn't match her words; she looked annoyed.

“Our guests are rested and refreshed?” asked one of the Generous Ones who had apparently been sent to attend to Maximilian. “Can we bring more food, more clothes? Perhaps you would both like to sleep for a while...”

“You're very gracious... and generous,” answered Maximilian. “But we would like to speak to Cejaiaqui and the rest of your people again, at your convenience.”

Alexandra could not gauge the elves' reaction to that; they merely looked back at the humans blankly for a moment, and then nodded.

“Cejaiaqui and the elders remain at the Place of Exchange, enjoying your generous gifts. No doubt they will be pleased to speak to you again.”

“Good.” Maximilian smiled. “We have more gifts.”

“Do you?” Siatani smiled back. Her large eyes gleamed. “So do we.”

The Most Terrible Gift

Siatani and the other two Generous Ones brought Maximilian and Alexandra back to the clay meeting house in the same manner that they had left – by Apparating them. Once more, Alexandra had to take in large gulps of air after the uncomfortable squeezing sensation that forced all the breath out of her lungs. Charlie squawked and wobbled dizzily, so she held the bird in her arms for a few minutes.

There were fewer elves in the Place of Exchange now, but several dozen still remained, and Cejaiaqui and his peers didn't seem to have moved at all. They were all enjoying the wizard-tobacco Maximilian had brought, filling the chamber with a thick, rich aroma that stung Alexandra's eyes.

“Ah, our generous guests return,” Cejaiaqui drawled, inhaling deeply from a hand-rolled cigarette. He exhaled a plume of blue-green smoke. “You cannot have rested long.”

“They are eager for our gifts!” exclaimed one of the older elves at his side.

“No, not at all,” Maximilian said, and then, when Cejaiaqui and the other Generous Ones looked offended, he hastily amended: “Of course, we are very impressed by your wonderful gifts! We would be embarrassed to accept any more gifts from you, for we are too poor and humble to be worthy of such generosity!”

He was trying to match the Generous Ones' flowery speech. Alexandra would have found it funny, if it didn't now feel more like a game where they didn't know the rules, but were doomed if they lost.

Indeed, Cejaiaqui looked amused, as he took another puff from his cigarette.

“Will you and your sister smoke with us?” he offered.

“My sister is too young to smoke,” Maximilian answered quickly.

"So are you!" Alexandra shot back, and then bit her lip and looked down. All of the Generous Ones looked surprised.

"My sister also has poor manners," Maximilian added, giving her a stern look.

"A troublesome little sister," Cejaiaqui observed. "But she does talk after all!"

The other elders laughed, and Alexandra heard more chattering among the Generous Ones gathered around them.

"As I said," Cejaiaqui sighed, "it is the way of wizards to be concerned only with what is exchanged, and not the exchange."

Maximilian bowed his head. "I apologize for any rudeness, on my part or my sister's. We do not know your ways. We are only here to speak for our father. If you will parlay with him –"

"Ah, yes, your father, the mighty wizard Abraham Thorn." Cejaiaqui nodded. "He has sent generous gifts and promises more. Yet, it is difficult indeed to match the generosity of your Confederation."

Maximilian didn't seem quite sure how to answer that. He paused, with his mouth open, but Cejaiaqui continued. "Once, any wizard could enter the Lands Below... or leave. Now, none can. None but those bearing Seals that we have given them. It is more peaceful, without your kind tracking your large feet through the Lands Below." The other Generous Ones nodded agreement, with chuckling and snickering as well. "But there is benefit, too, in being free to exchange gifts with any who would come."

Maximilian sat quietly and listened. So did Alexandra.

The old elf leaned forward, peering at them from across the fire pit, through the haze of cigarette smoke.

"Your father wishes to come and go in the Lands Below, bearing a token of our good will? If he is a great wizard among your people, then surely he knows we do not give such a gift lightly."

“But you have given it,” Maximilian responded, a little too hastily. He held his tongue a moment, as Cejaiaqui paused and gave him an inscrutable look, and then, trying to sound more assured, he went on: “Of course our father sent us here knowing he would have to offer you gifts of equal value, or greater. Our father is a generous man also.”

Yes, he's very generous with expensive brooms and dresses, Alexandra thought sourly.

But the Generous Ones seemed taken by Maximilian's words. Cejaiaqui gave him a long look, then turned his head and stared at Alexandra for a long time. Finally, he raised the cigarette to his mouth again, and closed his eyes as he drew deeply, then exhaled with a loud, “Aah!”

The cloud of smoke he blew out seemed to spread throughout the room. The tobacco smoke was giving Alexandra a headache. That and not having had enough food or rest was making her sleepy.

“We shall give you this gift – we shall enchant something that will allow you to cross the borders between the Lands Below and the Lands Above, and mark you as a generous friend of the Generous Ones. Of course –” Cejaiaqui shrugged. “– all the Lands Below are not ours. Nothing guarantees your safety from all who dwell here.”

Maximilian nodded. Alexandra remembered Bewi's warning about seeking the Generous Ones.

“What token has your father sent?” Cejaiaqui asked, addressing Maximilian.

Maximilian looked confused.

“Whatever you wish us to enchant must be a token offered by the wizard who would have it,” Cejaiaqui explained, sounding a little annoyed.

“Like an obol!” Alexandra whispered, excitedly. Maximilian shot another warning look at her, but Cejaiaqui smiled thinly.

“Like an obol,” the elf agreed. He held up one of the gold Lions Maximilian had brought. “But a coin is merely a coin, cold-minted metal, stamped by goblins...” His upper lip pulled up in a sneer. “These are only tools of wizard-trade. Useful, yes, and gold is gold. But we cannot make an obol of these, and what your father asks for is far more powerful than an obol.” He gave Maximilian a quizzical look. “He must have sent something of his that he intended you to bring back.”

Maximilian's tongue ran over his lips quickly, as he pondered this. Alexandra could see that he was improvising as he went along – an experience with which she was quite familiar – but clearly their father hadn't known as much as the Generous Ones were assuming he did. Or he hadn't shared it with Maximilian.

She put a hand over her mouth to stifle a cough, and glanced at Charlie, whose head was turning this way and that. She wondered if the smoke was bothering the raven, too; her familiar had been uncharacteristically quiet as well, possibly taking a cue from her. The raven hadn't even clucked when Cejaiaqui flashed the gold coin.

Her mouth dropped open, and she let out a little gasp. She coughed, and elbowed her brother. “Max!” she whispered.

He turned to her, scowling angrily.

“I've got it!” she mouthed silently to him. She gave him a wide-eyed, earnest look. His eyebrows went up, and his anger turned to bafflement.

Slowly, Alexandra rose to her feet. She held out a hand, to still her brother, as he almost rose to stop her. She looked at him again pleadingly, and he gritted his teeth, and sat where he was, fists clenched, body tense, watching her.

She walked around the fire pit, while the Generous Ones' eyes fixed on her, and no one made a sound. Charlie still sat on her shoulder,

and she willed, desperately, for her raven to stay there and remain quiet, as she knelt in front of Cejaiaqui, and then reached under her cloak and the collar of her jacket, to pull her father's locket from around her neck.

Charlie stirred excitedly, and began making a sound.

“Shh,” she breathed. “Please, Charlie.”

The raven continued hopping right and left, when not digging its claws into her, but didn't leave her shoulder as she held out the locket, dangling on its gold chain, to Cejaiaqui.

The old elf did not look at her, but extended a spindly gray arm and wrapped his fingers around the locket. He pulled it back to hold it in front of his face and examine it. He opened it without a word or a gesture, seemingly unaffected by the charms that usually kept it sealed, and regarded the cameo of Abraham Thorn silently.

Then he snapped it shut and nodded. “This will do.” He looked past Alexandra to Maximilian. “You may take this back to your father.”

Feeling relief – and a little pleased with herself – Alexandra stood up and returned to Maximilian's side.

Her brother reached out and clasped her hand, and she smiled, as he spoke to Cejaiaqui again. “We are grateful. And having imposed on your hospitality so long, we would not like to be rude guests who overstay our welcome –”

“Nonsense.” Cejaiaqui waved aside Maximilian's protestations. “The distance you have traveled is great, and even with your father's gift, you must return to one of the openings to the Lands Above. And we must enchant it first.” The other elves murmured agreement. “You will want to rest, and perhaps speak to your sister?” He shrugged, looking at them with an odd smile.

Alexandra was tired, and the thought of lying down in those soft furs again was appealing, even if another part of her wanted to get out of here and away from these creepy elves as quickly as possible.

“You are kind and generous,” Maximilian replied, a little tightly.

“Of course, we have more gifts to offer you, for you to take back to your father,” Cejaiaqui went on.

Maximilian stammered something, trying to come up with a polite way to refuse, then said, “And we have more gifts for you!”

Despite offering a chance to rest, it seemed to amuse the Generous Ones to keep playing this game with the young wizard, as Cejaiaqui offered food, some carved wooden sticks that were not exactly wands, but which had magical properties such as the ability to call rain or banish wind (or so he told Maximilian), little stone heads that talked, but whose usefulness eluded Alexandra, a snake – really, most of the gifts they were offering now were rather like the bone flute; strange, enchanted artifacts that she and Maximilian had no idea how to use. She wondered if the Generous Ones were offering them the equivalent of old knick-knacks that Muggles would get rid of in a yard sale.

Maximilian, in turn, was handing out whatever he could retrieve from his pack that might impress the Generous Ones. He gave Cejaiaqui his Danger Alarm, the Bubotuber Balloons and Homing Stars, and a Skyhook, though he seemed to be trying to hold onto the Lost Traveler's Compass.

At one point, another of the Generous Ones commented that Alexandra really didn't need her broom. Alexandra glared at the elf – he seemed to be a younger one, sitting far from Cejaiaqui, and Cejaiaqui gave the junior elf an ominous scowl, and apologized for the covetousness of his mannerless kin. But Maximilian took the hint, and soon was offering up his own broom. Alexandra was bothered by that – maybe they wouldn't need their brooms to get back across the Lands Below, and they could both ride hers in a pinch, and she was glad Maximilian had given away his instead of hers. But this seemed like a very lopsided game of 'gift-giving.'

Her eyelids were getting heavy, and her head was getting droopy, and she was forcing herself to stay awake, and having a hard time paying attention. She really wanted to get out of this smoke-filled hall.

She was rather embarrassed when her brother shook her awake.

"Alex," he murmured. "We're going now."

"Back home?" she mumbled, looking around. They were still in the Place of Exchange, and the fire was still burning, but the Generous Ones were filing out.

"Not yet. Back to those guest-houses... the Gift-Place, Asterintu calls it." He nodded to one of the elves who had waited on him earlier. Siatani and Lialuco were there, too. Alexandra looked around, and asked, "Where's Quimley?"

"What do you need of Quimley?" Siatani asked. "Shall I summon him for you, human child?"

She bit her lip, then shook her head. She didn't really need anything from Quimley; she just would have been happier to see him. "No. That's all right."

"We shall take you back to your guest-houses," Siatani said soothingly, holding out her hand. "You can sleep, sleep, until it is time."

"Time for what?" Alexandra mumbled.

"Time to go, of course," Maximilian said. He covered his mouth to hide a yawn. He was tired, too.

"Of course," Asterintu murmured.

"Should we talk?" Alexandra whispered to Maximilian.

"We will, but sleep first. We may need it," he sighed. "We're still going to have to get back across the Lands Below."

“On one broom,” she added dryly.

The elves assigned to take them back to their guest-houses were looking at them strangely. Then Siatani took her hand, and Asterintu took Maximilian's, and Alexandra held her breath, with her other arm wrapped around her very unhappy familiar, as they were squeezed through the space in-between where they had left and where they were going. She gasped and stumbled, as they arrived back in the clay dwelling with the carpet and the woven basket full of furs. The bathtub was gone now, and there was no sign of Quimley.

“Do you wish anything else, human child?” asked Siatani.

Alexandra was tempted to tell the Generous One that she had a name, but merely shook her head. “No. I'm fine.” She laid her broom down next to the 'bed.' “Just privacy, if you don't mind.”

Her tone might have been a little sharper than was polite, but Siatani and Lialuco merely nodded. “Sleep well then, human child,” Siatani murmured. The two of them disappeared.

Alexandra shrugged off her cloak and her jacket. “Are you all right, Charlie?” she yawned. “Got enough to eat, greedy-guts?”

Charlie cawed.

She took off her boots and her socks, and her belt, but decided not to undress any further. She might need to get up quickly.

She would have rather had Maximilian closer than the adjacent dwelling. When they'd been sleeping in the same tent, she could hear his breathing, and they both knew the other one was all right. But if the Generous Ones wanted to hurt them, what could they do about it? She sighed, and made herself cozy in the furs piled up in the basket, pulling a few over herself.

Charlie perched on the edge of the basket, by her head, and she smiled up at the raven.

"You gonna watch over me, Charlie?" she asked. "Or are you gonna sleep?"

"Sleep well," Charlie rasped, in a voice much like Siatani's.

She smiled, and closed her eyes, and was asleep in moments.

Come human child, and join us, in our hidden Lands Below,
leave behind the world of men, which has ill-served you so.

It had been dark and silent: the most perfect, absolute darkness Alexandra had ever known. The scream that had filled her ears at first was soon swallowed in the void, and she was falling, endlessly. She spread her arms, and felt nothing.

The sun, it burns!
The wind, it burns!
The sand, it burns!
The lands above, they burn.
You will not be burned here.
Not by sun.
Not by wind.
Not by sand.

Alexandra woke up, and put on her socks and boots. She could hear them calling to her, outside, with a low, dirge-like chant. It had seeped into her dreams, lulling her, and now she knew she was meant to go outside and join them.

"Alexandra!" squawked Charlie.

She didn't shush the bird, or even look at Charlie. She picked up the bone flute – she knew she was meant to bring that. Then, though it took her several long moments, standing there thinking – or rather, trying to think – she straightened, and walked to the door, leaving her wand and broom behind.

Come human child, and join us, in our hidden Lands Below,
we call to you, in your own tongue; it's time, it's time to go.

Charlie screeched her name again, and then flapped over to her shoulder, and pecked at her ear.

“Stop it, Charlie,” she mumbled, pushing the raven away.

Outside, there were even more Generous Ones than had been in the Place of Exchange. The bottom of the chasm in which the clay guest-houses were located was like a deep stone bowl, surrounded by the high, black cliffs Alexandra had seen earlier. Now, it seemed even darker than before, and though she glanced up, before her attention was drawn forward again, she could barely see the demarcation between the edges of the cliffs above and the blackness overhead.

The Generous Ones were like scores of pale ghosts, spread out along the rocky ground in front of her, ringing the bowl-like depression at the bottom of this dry gorge, and perched on rocks and ledges all around it. Only the very bottom of the chasm was empty, and as Alexandra emerged from her quarters, the elves shifted and moved aside, making a path for her from the doorway to the impenetrable black shadows in the center of their gathering.

Leave behind your wand;
you will not need it.
Leave behind your broom;
you will not need it.
Leave behind your raven;
you will not need it.
Leave, leave behind.

It was a very strange chant. It didn't even make sense, and Alexandra didn't like the part about leaving behind her wand and her raven, in particular, yet the part of her mind that would have compelled action, that might have reasoned why she didn't like this, seemed to be asleep. The Generous Ones continued chanting, and she walked forward, with no thought of resisting.

Charlie screeched in her ear, and flapped madly in circles around her head.

“Quit fussing, Charlie!” she griped.

Past rows of silent elves who all stared at her with wide, expectant eyes, she marched down the short slope, with the words of the elves who were doing the chanting filling her ears and smothering thought.

Come human child, and join us, in our hidden Lands Below,
for the world above is more sorrowful, than you can ever know.

At the very bottom of the chasm, she was all but blind. The darkness was almost solid and physical, and she had no idea if she might be stepping into a hole or walking into a nest of scorpions; she could barely see her hand in front of her face, and Charlie was only a flapping sound in her ears.

Someone spoke – it was a familiar, creaking voice – and then light flared, almost blinding Alexandra for a moment. There was now a fire blazing near the depression she was standing in, and she saw it came from one of those magical hides that burned without ever being consumed – maybe the same one that had been back in the Place of Exchange, for all she knew. The fire illuminated a number of Generous Ones, ringing it, and a large rock next to it, on which sat Cejaiaqui, holding the locket of Abraham Thorn.

The flames were the only source of light down here, so she could only see a few of the faces near the fire, though she still sensed the Generous Ones surrounding her on all sides. She now saw that she was standing on a flat, black surface; whether clay or stone, she could not tell. It was unnaturally flat and featureless, and she felt a chill and a queasy sensation in the pit of her stomach. She might have recognized it, if her brain didn't seem to be asleep.

Charlie screeched again, and Cejaiaqui scowled at the raven, then beckoned Alexandra towards him. Without questioning why, she approached.

Yet farther still, you will go,
beyond the Lands Below,
beyond the Lands Below,
to the Lands Beyond.

Cejaiqui reached above her head, and lowered the chain around her neck. Alexandra looked down at the locket, reflecting fire light as it lay against her collarbone. Charlie cawed again, and shrieked, "Troublesome! Troublesome!"

"You have our gift to you?" Cejaiqui inquired.

Alexandra blinked, puzzled, and he said, "The flute!"

She nodded, and held it up.

Someone shouted, "Alexandra!" but she ignored it, as she ignored Charlie's squawking.

"Play," Cejaiqui commanded.

Alexandra frowned.

"Alexandra!" the screaming was louder now, closer. There was some kind of commotion, back in the direction from whence she'd come, but that didn't concern her.

"I don't know how," she told Cejaiqui.

"Play," Cejaiqui repeated. "The magic of the Gift-Place is enough. Your skill does not matter."

She nodded, and put the flute to her lips. The person calling her name was screaming now, but she ignored him, and blew, trying, as she had before, to produce some sort of tune, though she had no idea what to do with her fingers. The sound that emerged was disharmonious and ugly, though as she continued blowing, she settled on something like a rhythm, alternating between two or three notes.

"What are you doing?" Maximilian screamed. She could hear boots skidding on stone, and his voice was coming closer. There was another flare of light, as well, as he must have cast a Light Charm so he could see, but she didn't look in his direction.

The ground in front of her, where she had been standing, turned blacker than black. It actually seemed to suck light into it, and cold radiated from the darkness.

Her flute-playing, the chanting of the Generous Ones, Charlie's screeches, her brother's screams, were all drowned out by whispers, a multitude of whispers, emanating from the darkness at the bottom of the Gift-Place.

"Crucio!" Her brother screamed the word, pointing his wand over the heads of a dozen elves between himself and Alexandra. She dropped the flute, as the pain hit her and made her double over.

Just a little taste.

It was enough to break the spell. She gasped, and straightened up, befuddled. Maximilian hurled two elves out of his way and leaped to her side. She saw Quimley at his heels; the former house-elf trembled and wrung his hands as he joined the two humans, looking down and moaning. The ground before them was a black void, and Alexandra could still hear those otherworldly whispers. The chanting of the Generous Ones had stopped. Their eyes were all now fixed on Alexandra and Maximilian, and the faces of the nearest ones, illuminated by Maximilian's wand, were malevolent.

"Forgive me," Maximilian whispered, his voice almost breaking. He put an arm around her.

Alexandra looked down at the flute at her feet, and shivered. Charlie landed on her shoulder.

What was going on?

Maximilian pointed his wand at Cejaiaqui, who looked more surprised than frightened.

"Has madness seized you, Abraham Thorn's son?" asked the elf.

"Quimley told me you're trying to send my sister to the Lands Beyond!" Maximilian snarled.

Cejaiiqui squinted at him. "Yes, as agreed."

"What do you mean, 'as agreed'?" Maximilian yelled. "We agreed to no such thing!"

"Of course you did." The Generous One's eyes narrowed. "That is why your father sent his daughter."

Maximilian gaped. "Are you mad? I did not bring my sister along as a human sacrifice!"

Alexandra looked around. She was very aware of being surrounded by hundreds of elves. She remembered what Em had been able to do to her. She really, really wished that she had her wand.

"You spoke plainly enough for all to understand." Cejaiiqui sounded angry now. "And only in the Lands Beyond can a token such as your father desires be made."

"You mean, she's supposed to take it to the Lands Beyond and bring it back?" Maximilian exclaimed.

"No, wizard." Cejaiiqui's expression was turning decidedly unpleasant. "No one returns from the Lands Beyond. Only the token can be summoned back."

"Forget it! Accio broom!" Maximilian pointed his wand back in the direction of the guest-houses.

An angry murmur went through the assembled Generous Ones.

"What has been gifted cannot be returned," Cejaiiqui declared.

"You can keep my broom!" Maximilian said angrily. "I'm summoning my sister's."

"I meant your sister," Cejaiiqui replied, as Alexandra saw something tumbling through the air towards them.

"I did not give you my sister!" he shouted.

"Oh, but you did." Cejaiaqui's voice was almost as cold as the void behind them. Alexandra now knew where she had heard those whispers before: in the room in Charmbridge's basement where John Manuelito and Sue Fox had summoned that... spirit. "And you cannot take her back."

Alexandra's Valkyrie almost hit them both. Maximilian just barely managed to catch it, and then Cejaiaqui gestured, and it slipped out of his hands and slammed into the ground as if it weighed a thousand pounds. Maximilian pointed his wand at the elf leader again, and Cejaiaqui laughed maliciously.

"Look around you, wizard," he rasped, gesturing at the Generous Ones who surrounded them. "You will die and be cast into the Lands Beyond along with your sister, before you cast another spell from that wand."

Alexandra shivered, and stepped closer to her brother. "Max, don't," she whispered.

She knew his temper. She was afraid he might actually attack Cejaiaqui. He was used to subservient house-elves, and if he had never had an elf freeze him in place and hold him helpless, he might not realize just how much trouble they were in.

He did seem to think better of cursing Cejaiaqui, though. He tried to speak calmly, though his jaw was clenched and Alexandra could hear the suppressed fury in his voice.

"This was not what I agreed to," he said. "Nor what my father intended. We will not trade my sister for the token. I apologize if I misunderstood, but —"

"You have no choice!" Cejaiaqui hissed, leaning towards him. "What you promised was promised, whether you understood what you promised or not! The gate to the Lands Beyond is open, and will not be closed until we send a living soul through."

“Please,” Maximilian pleaded. “Let us go. My father will pay any other price. We will return without your gift.”

“It is too late to renege on your promise.” Cejaiaqui's eyes glowed, but his face was stone. “We owe no mercy to wizard-kind.”

Alexandra was thinking desperately, but she could see no way out. If only they could Apparate to safety! She thought that was far beyond anything she could do with doggerel verse, but she started composing a rhyme in her head nonetheless – and then remembered she didn't even have her wand. She groaned, and then Maximilian said, “What if I go instead of my sister? Let her take back the token to my father.”

“Max, no!” she gasped.

“Let my sister go, and I will go to the Lands Beyond.” Maximilian kept his gaze fixed on Cejaiaqui.

Cejaiaqui shrugged indifferently, but his smile was cruel. “Which of you goes is not important.”

Alexandra screamed: “NO!”

“Give me the locket, Alexandra.” He turned to her, reaching for the chain around her neck, and she pushed his hands away, and slapped and kicked at him, shaking her head furiously.

“No! No! No! Forget it! Never! I won't let you! Never!” she cried, and then he slapped her across the face.

While she reeled in shock, Charlie screeched and dived at him. Maximilian ducked his head and pointed his wand, shooting a stream of sparks to drive the raven away. With his other hand, he grabbed Alexandra's upper arm in a crushing grip.

“Do as I ordered, Witch-Private Quick!” he barked, in the same voice he used when giving commands in JROC. “Like in the panthers' lair!”

Protests were already forming on her lips again, and he shook her, hard. "Follow my instructions, like before!" he said urgently, as her head was jerked back and forth.

Her mouth gaped open, and she blinked, as his eyes bored into hers. The Generous Ones were staring at them. She knew Quimley was still next to them, but she couldn't take her eyes off of her brother. His words sank in.

"L-Like before," she stammered.

"Do as you're told, like you're supposed to," he repeated, and he took the chain from around her neck. She stood there, trembling, while Maximilian put the locket around his own neck. Then he pulled her close to him, and kissed her cheek.

Alexandra swallowed hard. She could barely breathe. Maximilian turned towards Cejaiaqui. "I don't want my sister to see this."

"We assumed you slept because you did not want to see your sister go to the Lands Beyond," Cejaiaqui sniffed.

Alexandra closed her eyes, trying to calm herself. This would work. Maximilian had a plan.

"You will let her go? Back to the guest-house to wait for you to bring the locket to her?"

She shuddered. Was that really what the Generous Ones believed? That Maximilian had 'given' her to them to be thrown through a gate into some otherworld, and that he was waiting for the 'gift' for which he'd traded her?

"Charlie," she gasped, and Charlie was there, on her shoulder, and then Maximilian was pressing the broom into her hands.

"Go," he whispered in her other ear. "Go and wait." She nodded. She opened her eyes and looked at him. She was afraid if she hesitated, she'd cry, or panic, or grab onto him and refuse to let go, so she mounted the Valkyrie and took off. The Generous Ones let her fly

over their heads, and she leaned forward, accelerating back to the guest-house.

“Wait outside, Charlie,” she rasped. She dropped the broom and jumped to the ground in one motion, and walked through the entrance to her quarters. She was forcing herself to think only one step ahead at a time. They'd have to be ready to leave really fast, she knew. The Generous Ones weren't going to like being tricked. She grabbed her wand, which was still lying where she'd left it. She was grateful for that – she had been afraid one of the Generous Ones might have already taken it.

She clenched it in her hand. That and the broom would have to do. No time to go to Maximilian's quarters and get his pack. She needed to be back outside, ready for them both to hop on the broom and get the hell out of here –

Quimley popped out of thin air in front of her, as she was heading back to the door.

“Quimley is so sorry, Miss,” the elf quavered, tears spilling down his cheeks.

“It's all right, Quimley,” she breathed. “Thank you, thank you for everything! But I have to get outside now.” She stepped around the elf and pushed aside the hide entrance again. As soon as she was outside again, and looking down at the darkness blanketing the assembly of elves, and the magic fire, her eyes sought the form of her brother. It was too dark down there, though. She only saw shadows.

“We must go, Miss,” Quimley said.

She nodded. “I know. You can come with us, Quimley.”

“Us?” Quimley blinked.

“We're going to have to jump on the broom and leave, as soon as my brother Apparates back here,” she whispered. “But I'm sure it can hold all three of us.”

Quimley stared directly at her. "Apparate?" He shook his head. "Is not possible, Miss."

Little slivers of ice pricked her heart. "Wh – what do you mean?"

"Abraham Thorn's son tried to Apparate to Miss's hut when Quimley woke him. Quimley told Miss's brother, the Generous Ones will not let wizards Apparate here. You can do nothing here if the Generous Ones does not permit it."

"Quimley, go get him!" Her voice rose in a panic. "Please, please, please go get him and bring him back here!" she begged, actually clasping her hands together.

Quimley gulped and shook his head, as more tears spilled from his eyes. "Is not possible, Miss. Now he is in their power."

Everything screeched to a halt inside her head, and then she was on her broom, screaming her brother's name, as she flew back where she'd just come from. Why couldn't she see the light from Maximilian's wand?

"Miss, no!" cried Quimley, but she didn't hear.

"MAX!" She almost plowed through a column of elves, who scattered as she hurtled towards the rock where Cejaiaqui stood. She held up her wand. "Ter Lumos!"

Light burst from the end of her wand, and all the Generous Ones covered their eyes to shield them from the sudden brilliant flare.

Maximilian was falling into the pool of darkness. He turned his head in her direction, and she saw his face, ghostly white, and the gleam of the locket around his neck, and then he plummeted straight down without a sound and disappeared.

"NO!" Alexandra screamed. Her eyes had seen it, but her mind could not accept it. He was gone, just like that.

Without a second thought, she dived after him.

As the void rushed at her, she heard those whispers becoming louder and louder, almost as if they were calling to her. She ignored the cold radiating from the Gift-Place, and Quimley's frantic screams. Just as she was about to cross the lightless threshold, an invisible force seized hold of her. Her broom shuddered and swerved aside. She howled in desperation, as she was dumped onto the hard rocky ground at the base of the rock where a surprised-looking Cejaiaqui stood, and her Valkyrie fell next to her with a clatter. Startled elves scattered away from her.

"You must not follow," the ancient elf told her sternly.

Alexandra barely heard him. She leaped to her feet and screamed, "MAX!" with all the power in her lungs. Her voice echoed up and down the dark chasm of the Gift-Place. Her Light Spell was already fading. But she didn't need light.

Alexandra didn't really believe in God, but she was willing to, if God would help her now. For the first time in her life, she prayed, and promised she'd give up magic forever, if only this spell worked, just this once. She pointed her wand downward, into the void, and poured every ounce of energy and concentration she had into it.

"Accio Maximilian!"

Nothing happened.

She waited, breathlessly, as her heart beat so loudly that she heard it even above the whispers from below, and Charlie's shrieking. Once, twice, three times her heart pounded in her ears.

"ACCIO MAXIMILIAN!" she screamed again.

Charlie cried, "Maximilian!" and flew in a circle around her.

"Your brother is gone," Cejaiaqui declared.

She ignored him, and screamed the incantation, over and over. The Generous Ones stared at the girl standing on the edge of the gateway to the Lands Beyond. A few of them might even have looked sympathetic – it didn't matter, because Alexandra didn't notice.

At last, when her throat ached and her temples were throbbing, she raised her eyes upwards, to where Cejaiaqui had settled calmly into a sitting position, and was now regarding her with a sort of detached interest.

She forced down her rage and swallowed the curses she wanted to fling at him. Instead, she dropped to her knees, ignoring the pain from the sharp rocks.

“Please,” she begged. Her voice was raw and hoarse. Tears spilled down her cheeks. “Bring him back. I'll give you anything. Anything. I'll stay here and be your slave forever. Just bring him back.”

“That is not within our power,” Cejaiaqui replied solemnly. There was no malice in his expression now, though no sympathy either. “No one returns from the Lands Beyond. Your brother is gone.”

Alexandra shook. It couldn't be.

Quimley was at her side, but she was only barely aware of the elf. Charlie landed on her shoulder, and cooed, even though her shoulder was shaking so violently that the raven had trouble perching there.

The Generous Ones had begun chanting again, but it wasn't the same chant as before. This one was eerie and inhuman, and there were no words Alexandra could recognize. She didn't care, wasn't paying attention. Pointlessly, her mind was going over and over those last few horrible moments, trying to think of what she should have done differently, what she could have done, what to do now. This wasn't right, and it couldn't be true – there had to be a way around this, some way she could undo what had just happened.

When Charlie squawked, it distracted her enough to look up, and she saw a glimmer of light in the depths of the void that Maximilian had

disappeared into. Her heart leapt, and she rose to her feet. He had returned somehow! She felt a blaze of hope.

Her father's locket levitated out of the darkness, still on its chain, reflecting light from the fire. Alexandra's eyes were glued to it, as it floated in her direction, and then over her head, and into Cejaiaqui's hand.

The Generous Ones continued chanting, and abruptly, the bottom of the Gift-Place's stone basin turned solid again, the impenetrable black shadows were replaced by packed clay, the whispers were cut off with a hiss, and then the Generous Ones fell silent.

Alexandra fell back to the ground, and again ignored the jolt of pain as hard rocks stabbed her knees. She let out a strangled cry.

"Rise, human child," commanded Cejaiaqui.

She ignored him, until Quimley spoke into her ear, very softly.

"Miss must get up," he whispered. "Please, Miss."

"Alexandra," Charlie cooed sadly into her other ear.

She stood, with her knees trembling. They were wet and sticky now, where the rocks had torn them open. When she looked up, Cejaiaqui was dangling the locket before him, above her head.

"Our gift, to your father," the Generous One said.

"Go to hell!" she hissed, shaking with fury.

Quimley covered his mouth and looked horrified. Other Generous Ones shrank away from her, and made angry, shocked noises. Cejaiaqui only blinked slowly at her.

"We thought your brother brought you here to give the most terrible gift, on your father's behalf," he rasped. "Such are the ways of wizards. Yet instead, he gave you the most precious gift. Take then, this gift from the Generous Ones."

“Gift?” she choked. “Gift? You forced him to do that! You killed him! You could have let us go! You didn't have to make one of us die! Generous Ones? GENEROUS?” Her voice rose to a shriek. “You evil little monsters! MURDERERS!”

Her tirade ended when she found herself unable to breathe. She clutched at her throat, and fell to her knees once again, this time on the verge of passing out. Then the invisible hands around her throat released her.

“We are generous, human child,” Cejaiaqui said to her, this time in a low, menacing voice. “So greatly were we impressed by your brother, that we shall forgive your unforgivable insult and allow you to leave. Rarely, rarely, do we forgive once, and never twice.”

She raised her eyes again. She was almost beyond rationality, but some part of her mind was still taking note of what she saw, and so her eyes fell on a slender stick of wood, lying at Cejaiaqui's feet.

“That...” Her voice now was a creak, almost as dry as the elf's. “That's Maximilian's wand.”

“His last gift to us. His generosity —”

She lunged, standing on her toes, and snatched it off the rock. Cejaiaqui's eyes flared. “You cannot —”

The sound that came out of Alexandra's mouth was not a spell, just an incoherent scream. But her fury transmitted itself through both wands in an explosive flash of light, and the leader of the Generous Ones was blasted off his feet.

There was a moment of shocked silence, and then the nearest elves howled in outrage. Three Generous Ones rushed at her, and she kicked the first one hard enough to send him flying back into his comrades, but then one of the older ones, wearing many beads and gold and silver ornaments dangling around his neck, raised a clenched fist in her direction, and she felt a blow slam into her, hard enough to rattle her teeth and knock all the air out of her lungs. She

tumbled backwards, head over heels, and skidded across the clay that had a minute ago been the portal to the Lands Beyond. It still felt ice-cold.

Dazed, she lifted her head, and saw more elves rushing at her. She pointed her wand and muttered a curse that conjured acrid smoke, billowing into their faces. The elves in front of her coughed and rubbed their eyes as the fumes stung them, but she felt little hands grabbing her ankles. When she rolled over, she raised her arm just in time to sweep another elf away before he slashed at her face with a sharp stone knife. She sprayed red-hot sparks in all directions from both wands, and kicked at the elves trying to pin her legs, but she was being surrounded on all sides, and she saw more knives coming at her. One elf jabbed a stick into her ribs, and she screamed as it burned like fire. She thrashed about in a panic, and with a crackle of electricity, a dozen elves were hurled away from her. But there were a hundred more, and she knew even with wands, she couldn't fight them all off.

"Accio broom!" she shouted.

Another Generous One, wearing a patchwork dress of hides and frighteningly large scales, raised her arms overhead, and a black cloud swarmed out of her cupped hands. It engulfed Alexandra, and huge black bugs crawled all over her, biting and stinging her from head to toe, even through her clothes. She screamed, trying to brush them off her. Her Summoning Charm had not worked.

Then she saw Quimley swinging her broom in both hands, knocking over several Generous Ones that seemed to be trying to dog-pile him. He spun in a circle and flung the broom at her. It could not have been the elf's strength alone that propelled it through the air, as it swept a path through the elven mob, knocking them aside until it reached her. Still holding the wands, she wrapped her arms around the broom and willed herself into the air. It yanked her upwards, with her feet dangling, much like her panicked ascent in the cavern of the underwater panthers. She felt burning and stinging all over her body, but ignored it as she climbed upwards and wrapped her legs around the broom.

“CHARLIE!” she screamed, looking down. And then she jerked to a halt as an invisible hand began dragging her and the broom back down towards the howling mob of Generous Ones. She tried to force the broom to keep climbing, but she continued to descend.

She saw something glitter, next to the still-burning fire. It was her father's locket, still in Cejaiaqui's grasp. The old elf was rising shakily to his feet. Smoke curled around him. He pointed one finger at Alexandra, and for an instant, she literally felt her heart stop. She shuddered and almost let go of the broom, and then a scream cut through the howling and chanting. Charlie dived at Cejaiaqui, clawing at his face and pecking at his eyes. The wizened elf raised both hands over his head, trying to protect himself.

She heard Quimley, from somewhere down in that chaos, cry, “Fly, Abraham Thorn's daughter! Fly!”

In the same instant, the invisible force dragging Alexandra down released her, and she shot back up even faster. The broomstick actually slipped through her arms and would have kept rising straight up without her, except she managed to hold onto the tail of the broom, with its short, narrow bristles poking her in the stomach. Ascending like a rocket, with Alexandra barely holding on to the tail, the Valkyrie carried her above the cliffs and out of the chasm, away from the Gift-Place and the Generous Ones, and up towards the cavernous ceiling of the Lands Below.

Beneath Charmbridge

As Alexandra shot upwards, some of the biting, stinging insects flew off of her as well, but that didn't rid her of all of them. She could barely think about what she was doing – it hurt so much, all over her body. She was still holding onto the wands; her broom, no longer being grasped by its handle and forced upwards, slowed and began tilting backwards, as if about to tumble back down to the ground, far below.

Alexandra curled and brought her knees up, and wrapped her legs around the broomstick. She transferred both wands into one hand, and grasped the handle with the other, which gave her enough control over the broom to roll herself back upright. She would have gasped in relief except she was afraid bugs would crawl into her open mouth. She could feel them biting her face.

She flinched, clenched the wands in a shaking hand, and stammered, “R-Rep-pello V-Vermis!”

It didn't work the first time. The second time, she managed to say it without stuttering, and the spray from her wand made all the bugs disperse. She heard a raucous caw. She opened her eyes – even that hurt, as her eyelids were now covered with bites and stings – and saw Charlie flying towards her. Something shiny was clutched in the raven's talons.

There was no time for her to think about that, as she heard yet another sound: a multitude of wings beating against the air. It was a sound she'd heard before. She looked up and saw a large, ominous black cloud descending on her.

“Fly, Charlie!” she cried, and dropped towards the sharp-edged cliffs below, aiming away from the Gift-Place.

She didn't accelerate to full speed, for fear of leaving Charlie behind. The swarm of bats followed, chittering and screeching, and for an interminable time, Alexandra was just hunched over her broom, constantly twisting her neck around to keep an eye on Charlie, always fearful that the bats would overtake them. Occasionally, she

tossed fire from her wand, when they were too close, but there were too many bats to drive them all away so easily.

The witch and the raven zoomed along, now skimming just over the tops of the small mountains that rose up to meet them along their path, and it seemed as if a solid wave of bats continued to descend towards them, rippling along in their wake. As one mass of bats fell behind, their fellows directly overhead would be stirred into flight, and then pursuit, so though Charlie could fly faster than the bats, they were never quite able to get so far ahead that they weren't dragging more aerial pursuers after them.

But the mountains became smaller and smaller, until they were only hills, and Alexandra and Charlie flew lower and lower, until they reached a vast chalky swamp. It was an endless series of mud puddles, with occasional, relatively dry islands, and once again, there was very little living that Alexandra could see, other than some stunted, stick-like plants, and an awful-looking white film of algae that spread across many of the larger puddles.

When she realized that the bats had finally stopped chasing them – they were apparently too low now to attract their notice – she aimed for the nearest 'high ground,' and bounced and skidded to a painful stop in the dirt. She rolled over, and lay on her back, breathing heavily.

She was covered with blood and bruises. Her side burned fiercely where the elf had struck her with a stick. And she could now feel the hundreds of bites on her body, which were beginning to burn like fire as well. She moaned, and lacked the will to continue on.

Charlie landed next to her. Even the raven's wings dragged on the ground a little.

“Alexandra,” croaked Charlie, dropping the locket next to her head.

“Charlie,” she whispered. She reached a hand out, to touch the bird, and then closed her eyes, and her body shook with dry heaves. Everything hurt. She was tired. She was lost. And she'd left Maximilian behind. She wanted to go back for him, but she had no

idea how to retrieve him from the Lands Beyond, even if she could face the Generous Ones again.

She lay there for some time, but it was the pain as much as anything else that forced her up again. Thrashing around with her skin on fire was almost as bad as when she'd been Crucioed. Her face was wet with tears that wouldn't stop, but she didn't notice as she sat up and took a meager inventory.

She had two wands, a broom, a locket, the clothes on her back, and Charlie.

She stuck Maximilian's wand into her pocket, and felt something else there, cold and smooth.

She took it out, and remembered Maximilian putting his arms around her, before he sent her away so she wouldn't see him sacrifice himself in her place. He had dropped the Lost Traveler's Compass into her pocket.

She let out a cry that was more of a choking sound, and the compass slipped through her fingers and fell to the ground. Charlie still sat on the ground next to her, watching her and making a low, soothing, cooing sound.

Alexandra pointed her wand at her face, and said, "Aguamenti."

It hurt to force the word out; her throat was cracked and bloody as well. The water that sprayed across her face cleared her vision a little, which had become blurred by dried tears and blood and grit, but it did little to relieve the stinging. She began applying the few healing charms she'd learned, and was able to reduce the pain in her face a little. She finally dared look at her side, and saw that the fabric of her shirt had been burned away, and it was hard to tell what was charred cloth and what was skin. She cast a minor charm for burns, but she knew she really needed Burn-Healing Paste and a proper healing spell. They'd had Burn-Healing Paste, in Maximilian's pack. She forced herself not to think about that.

Her arms and legs, her neck and her face, and under her clothes, every other part of her, burned like a thousand bee-stings, but the angry red bumps rising on her skin looked more like gigantic mosquito bites. Almost every muscle in her body was twitching now, and she kept moving only because there was nothing she could do about the pain, and lying there wouldn't make it hurt any less. She kept choking out dry, rasping sobs.

She reached down to pick up the Lost Traveler's Compass, and wiped gray chalky mud off of it – the water from her Aguamenti spell had created a puddle. As she did, she noticed that where the mud caked on her fingers and the palm of her hand, the stinging subsided.

She rose shakily to her feet, swayed, and then staggered towards a large bubbling pool of gray sludge. It gave off a musty odor, but it wasn't really so terrible. She knelt and scooped up some of the mud in one hand, and experimentally smeared it across her forearm. It didn't make the pain go away entirely, but the soothing effect was immediate and noticeable. With slow, lethargic motions, she rolled up her sleeves and pants legs, and rubbed mud onto her arms and legs, then coated her face and neck as well. She lifted her shirt, and smeared some across her stomach.

Maybe I should just take a mud bath. For a moment, she gave the idea serious consideration. Then she caught sight of something moving in the soupy liquid – it scurried up onto a muddy little hillock that rose a few inches above the surface of the chalk-mud swamp, and then back into the water. Alexandra saw many, many segmented body parts, and even more legs. The thing was nearly as big around as her arm.

Maybe not, she thought.

She didn't know how long she stood there, before she finally turned back around. Her legs were still shaky as she walked back to her broom, and collapsed into a cross-legged position on the ground. The bites and stings were no longer so excruciating, but she still hurt all over.

“Charlie,” she croaked.

The raven looked up at her. She couldn't read any expression in Charlie's beady black eyes, but the bird's voice sound forlorn as it replied, "Alexandra."

She picked up the locket, with a trembling hand. Charlie didn't even make a sound or snatch at it. Alexandra winced – even raising her arms hurt – and slipped the chain over her head.

Alexandra.

With a cold, numb feeling, she realized she was 'hearing' her father's voice again, as the locket settled around her neck.

She didn't answer at first. She sat where she was, and only stirred when she noticed a large centipede-like thing crawling out of the muck, a few feet away. She pointed her wand at it, and blasted it back into the water.

Alexandra! Are you in danger?

She laughed, making a choking sound that hurt her throat.

Alexandra, talk to me.

"Maximilian is gone," she mumbled.

What do you mean?

"He went to the Lands Beyond," she whispered.

Silence answered her back.

Alexandra rose to her feet. She looked at the Lost Traveler's Compass, and waited until its needle pointed steadily in one direction. That was the way they had come – she and Maximilian.

Do you have the means to return, Alexandra? her father asked. She couldn't sense any emotion in his voice, and had no idea what he was thinking.

“Yes.”

Come back.

“If you can talk to me, why can't you come and get me? Why didn't you talk to me before?”

There were many more questions bouncing around in her head, but she could barely form them, much less speak them aloud.

I could not reach you through the locket, until now. I only just felt the link return. I thought at first you had returned already from the Lands Below. His voice faltered a moment. I tried to Apparate to you, but I cannot. I don't understand –

“If I make it back, maybe you can figure it out.”

Alexandra –

“Can you do anything to help me get back?”

There was a pause, and then he replied: I have no means to reach you, or guide you, where you are.

“Then I think you should stop talking to me. I can't... can't think about too many things right now.”

She felt a flash of anger, and then her father's voice fell silent.

Alexandra picked up her broom and mounted it.

“Come on, Charlie,” she commanded, in a voice that kept cracking. “It's time to go.”

“Fly! Fly!” Charlie said. The raven fluttered up to land on the end of her broom.

She took off. She stayed close to the ground, keeping an eye overhead. She didn't fly too fast. Sometimes Charlie rode on her

broom, balancing precariously with wings partially extended, and sometimes the raven flapped alongside her. She followed the needle of the Lost Traveler's Compass as the chalky swamp passed below them. She had no idea how far they had traveled to reach the domain of the Generous Ones, or how long it would take to get back by broom.

There were other things she knew she should think about, too – like food, and Lagaru, and Generous Ones, and underwater panthers. But she couldn't think about too many things, so she just concentrated on flying.

Alexandra didn't remember much of her flight back across the Lands Below. She saw muddy swamps, a landscape of cracked, broken fissures, a cold, glittering desert of fine, crushed sand, and a forest of trees no taller than her, with creatures she couldn't identify scampering among them. She passed over a huge lake – perhaps the same one she and Maximilian had reached after their skirmish with the Lagaru. She couldn't tell.

She didn't know how far she traveled. Perhaps it was only a few miles; perhaps it was a thousand. She knew the geography of this place was impossible, and there was no comparing how far she traveled by broom with how far she and Maximilian had hiked, or how far they had been transported by the bone flute. It was all she could do to stay on the broom and keep following the needle of the Lost Traveler's Compass.

She realized she was falling asleep on her broom when Charlie cawed a warning. Startled, she opened her eyes, and saw that her feet were almost scraping the ground. She pulled up just in time.

That wasn't the last time she nodded off while flying. Charlie pecked at her head when she began rising too high above the ground. She tried to stay awake, and considered stopping to rest, but without a tent, and unable even to cast the protective wards Maximilian knew, she wasn't sure Charlie would be able to wake her in time if the Lagaru or something worse came upon her.

It was not until she saw a rock cliff face that seemed to stretch from one end of the horizon to the other that anything looked familiar. The Lost Traveler's Compass guided her to a gaping opening at the bottom of that cliff – one of many.

Alexandra landed, and looked into the dark tunnel. Charlie landed on her shoulder.

She didn't think the Lost Traveler's Compass could tell them if the path back the way they'd come was now blocked. She remembered Maximilian trying to collapse the tunnel behind them as they'd fled from the underwater panthers. Each time she thought of Maximilian, icy fingers seemed to reach into her guts and jab and twist them, and each time, she took deep breaths and ignored the feeling, focusing on anything but that.

"We can take one of those other tunnels," she suggested to Charlie, speaking in a soft, hushed tone. "They might lead to some other gateway out of the Lands Below."

Charlie clucked, listening to her, but not offering any useful suggestions.

"Of course, maybe underwater panthers are waiting by all of them. Or something worse. Max..." Her words caught in her throat. "Max said all the entrances are probably guarded."

"Maximilian," Charlie warbled. Alexandra closed her eyes, squeezing them shut so tightly that it hurt, and then opened them again.

"The problem is," she went on, her voice dropping to a hoarse whisper, "I don't even know if the tunnel is blocked. All those Deprimo spells..."

She wasn't really expecting Charlie to offer useful input. It just felt better to talk to her familiar. The raven bobbed its head, and looked around watchfully.

Underwater panthers probably had really good hearing, too, she thought, and smell. What were the chances that she could just crawl

her way back through this tunnel, even assuming it wasn't blocked, and not find the occupants of the lair waiting for her?

Pretty nearly zero, she decided. She might as well just hurl herself down the tunnel on her broom. Either she'd make it or she wouldn't.

She looked at Charlie, who was looking back at her. For some reason, throwing herself into the jaws of death bothered her less than taking her familiar with her.

"We might die now, Charlie," she said.

"Alexandra," Charlie replied.

She kissed the top of the bird's head. Charlie cooed. Then she swallowed, and pulled up her shirt. "I've got to hold on to you, Charlie. We might have to go really fast."

Charlie squawked and protested, as she tucked the raven under her shirt. She winced as she felt talons scratching the flesh of her stomach. Then Charlie's head peeked out from inside her collar, below her chin. Her shirt stretched over the bird, pressing it to her chest. Charlie's wings and tail feathers were now scraping against her, which hurt, but she doubted this was comfortable for Charlie either, and at least she'd gotten the bird's beak and claws away from her skin.

She first pointed her wand at Charlie, and said, "Silencio." Next, she lit her wand with a Light Spell, and finally, she cast a second Silencing Charm on herself.

The underwater panthers at least would not be able to hear them coming, she thought. She sure wouldn't be hard to smell right now, but maybe on her broom, she could move faster than her scent.

It wasn't the best plan, but it was the only one she could come up with.

She mounted her broom again, and flew as quickly as she could, with the light from her wand showing her where the tunnel twisted and

turned. Here and there she found piles of rubble, and holes blasted in the ceiling. Maximilian hadn't been too successful at blocking off the tunnel, though, and for that, she supposed she should be grateful. Only once did she actually have to land, and squeeze her way through a narrow gap where a Deprimo spell had apparently dislodged enough rocks to bring down half the tunnel, and left no room for flying. She put an arm over Charlie, still nestled beneath her shirt, to avoid crushing the bird against the side of the tunnel, and while her Silencing Charm drowned out the sound of her footsteps, she wasn't entirely sure that the rocks she dislodged and sent rolling wouldn't make noise, beyond the range of the spell.

Past that bottleneck, she jumped back onto her broom, and flew even faster, almost running into bends in the tunnel several times. Her initial plan had been to extinguish her wand just before she reached the lair of the underwater panthers. There were two problems with that plan, which in her hurt and exhausted state did not occur to her until it was much too late: she couldn't say, "Nox," while she was Silenced, and there was no way she could recall their panicked escape well enough to guess when they were getting close to the large cavern that Maximilian had called an antechamber into the Lands Below.

She didn't even realize she'd emerged from the tunnel and was now flying in the panthers' lair until she saw that the light from her wand was no longer touching walls, floor, or ceiling. She was floating in what seemed like an immense dark void. That thought brought another dark void to mind, and she shuddered.

She almost flew into the water. She saw the light of her wand reflecting off the surface just in time, and stopped.

Then she was bathed in illumination from below – two brilliant orbs glowing more brightly than her wand. She was almost hypnotized by the lights, as they grew closer and brighter, and then with a silent scream, she shot upwards, just as a huge copper-colored head broke the surface, with jaws that opened wide enough to swallow Alexandra whole.

She ascended on her broom, and the enormous underwater panther came after her, leaping into the air and belching fire. More horrifying, even as she continued to climb, the panther kept rising into the air as well – just how high could this thing jump? For a few seconds, Alexandra thought she would be incinerated or eaten – and then the snarling, copper face of the enormous cat began falling away from her. Alexandra could smell its breath – it was foul, like rotting meat soaked in methane. Heat washed over her.

She could not see the ceiling above her. It was too dark, too high overhead. She kept climbing, and was surrounded by darkness again. Far below was a fiery flash and a roar, and she instinctively ducked her head, looking around for a swarm of bats, but none appeared. Darkness swallowed her, and she thought she might end up smashing herself against the ceiling, or maybe impaling herself on a stalactite.

And abruptly she came out of the darkness, and tried to brake, but not quickly enough. She twisted around, her back slammed into the stone ceiling, and she tumbled to the ground – which was the floor of a much smaller cave, only a few yards below. She put out her hands, dropping her wand, and she felt her wrist snap as she hit the clay floor of the cavern, but her outstretched arms probably saved Charlie from being crushed. She rolled over onto her back, gasping in pain.

She was back in the oval chamber, in the lowest basement beneath Charmbridge Academy, lying on the floor that was the gate to the Lands Below.

Charlie crawled out from under her shirt. She wanted to tell the raven to go, flee to safety, find someone – but even if she weren't Silenced, she couldn't form the words.

“Alexandra?”

Alexandra opened her eyes. Had she been unconscious? She supposed so. She was still in the oval cavern. There was light still coming from a wand – but not hers.

Abraham Thorn was kneeling next to her.

“How...?” she groaned, and he shook his head.

“Shh,” he murmured, and he began waving his wand around her. He wasn't even speaking any incantations, but the mud and filth caked onto her began to disappear, and the pain from her burns and bites and bruises faded. He took her wrist gently in one hand, and she flinched and bit her lip to keep from crying out. Then he touched it with his wand, and her wrist stopped hurting, too.

“You're going to need a Healer,” he said. “You've gotten yourself quite banged up. But this will do for now.”

He helped her sit up, and then stand.

“Charlie?” she mumbled, looking around. She shivered. It was cold, and she was still wearing only boots, pants, and shirt – all of which were now torn and singed. Her shirt was practically in tatters.

“Your raven is making a great deal of noise upstairs.” Her father gazed down at her. When she moved to dash down the tunnel leading to the stairs, he caught her. “If Charlie made it this far, I'm sure you don't need to worry.”

She looked at him in confusion, and then memories began flooding back into her head, and she remembered where she was, and what had just happened.

“Maximilian,” she choked.

“Yes. Maximilian is gone,” her father said gravely, his voice little more than a whisper. “I know this to be true now.” He knelt in front of her, holding her hands.

“He... he sacrificed himself. To save me.” She felt numb as she said the words.

Abraham Thorn looked solemn, almost expressionless, as he nodded.

“But you made it back,” he said. “How? How did you return from the Lands Below?”

“That's what you wanted, isn't it?”

He didn't react, but his mouth tightened slightly.

“A way to get to the Lands Below,” she continued. “Even if it meant losing one of your children.”

“Alexandra,” her father said, in a low voice. “I will mourn Maximilian until the end of my days. And I do not wish to leave you now – truly I do not – but the Auror Authority will already be aware of my presence here, and I must leave, quickly. Please, my child. Give me what you recovered, what Maximilian gave his life for. We will speak later –”

“Always 'later,'" she whispered. “Did you tell Max that, too?”

“Alexandra, there will be another time for you to heap blame and curses upon me.”

She pushed him away, and stepped back.

“Just how clueless were you, really, about what the Generous Ones wanted, about what you'd have to trade?” she demanded.

Her father rose to his feet, and his expression became a scowl. “Generous ones? I don't understand you.”

“Maybe you knew that someone had to die to get what you wanted,” she went on. “You're the one who knows so much about how terrible the Confederation is and how it makes deals –”

“Alexandra, you're making no sense!” he snapped.

“– and I was thinking, did you really expect me not to find out about Maximilian's real mission, and want to go with him? I am clever and resourceful, after all.”

He opened his mouth, looking angry, but Alexandra continued, her voice rising shrilly: "So maybe you knew you'd have to give up a child, but maybe it wasn't Max who was supposed to die, 'cause after all, you only had one son, but you did have an extra daughter you didn't need –"

"ALEXANDRA!" His voice thundered over hers. "You are being hysterical! I know you are overcome with grief, and after what you've just been through, I don't blame you for being irrational, but what you are implying is abominable!"

"Hysterical?" she screamed. "Irrational?" Her voice had become a shriek that even to her ears did indeed sound hysterical and irrational, but she could no longer control herself. She snatched the locket from around her neck. "This is abominable! This is what Max died for! This is what you wanted so much?"

Her father had a pained expression, but she didn't miss how his eyes immediately fixed on the locket – the token he had sent, with his daughter.

"You want to see hysterical and irrational?" she screamed. "I'll show you hysterical and irrational!"

She spun about and stepped towards the nearest cavern wall, with a mighty swing of her arm, raising it to smash the locket against the stone with all her strength.

But she didn't. Instead, she froze in place, with her arm above her head, and the locket swinging by its chain, winding and unwinding around her wrist, as Abraham Thorn walked over to her. Gently, he pried it from her Petrified fingers.

"My dear child," he said. "I am sorry. I am so very sorry."

She couldn't move, or say anything. She couldn't even tremble, though her rage was so great that it was a wonder she didn't smolder and ignite where she stood.

Her father knelt next to her. "I do love you, Alexandra," he whispered. "I am sorry for the things I've had to do, and for the things I will have to do in the future, and I am sorry for this."

He raised his wand to her temple, and Alexandra didn't remember anything after that.

Return to Roanoke

Later, Alexandra was told that it was Em who found her, alerted by Charlie's screeching in the basements. But Lilith Grimm was the first person she actually saw. The Dean found her in a strange oval cavern, Petrified in a posture that made her look as if she were trying to throw something.

Alexandra couldn't explain what it was she'd been doing, or how she'd gotten there, or who had cast a Body-Bind Charm on her. She also had no explanation for the partially-healed bruises, burns, and insect bites all over her body, or her fractured wrist.

She was taken to the infirmary, where Mrs. Murphy clucked and fussed over her, aghast and appalled. Her ruined clothes were taken away, and the nurse applied pastes and potions and healing charms, and then gave her a gown, promising she'd have a change of clothes brought from her room.

Alexandra knew there was something very wrong, especially when she asked where Maximilian was.

She was growing angry at the way all the adults were giving each other grim looks and refusing to answer her questions, and keeping her friends away from her. She was about to jump off the bed in the infirmary and leave, when she heard two very familiar, and very similar, voices arguing outside.

"She doesn't know!" Ms. Grimm was saying. "She doesn't remember!"

"We have to talk to her, Lilith," Ms. Grimm replied calmly.

Alexandra blinked. Both voices were Ms. Grimm. So Diana Grimm was here, too. What was going on?

She was still wearing nothing more than a thin gown under the blanket Mrs. Murphy had given her to keep warm, so she wasn't at all happy to see a man enter the infirmary, along with Mrs. Murphy and the Grimm sisters.

Lilith Grimm looked furious. Diana Grimm's expression was carefully neutral.

Alexandra recognized the man by his bald, deeply tanned head, even before she saw he was wearing the same red shirt and black gloves and cloak he'd been wearing the first time she'd met him. His name was Richard Raspire, and he was one of the Governor-General's personal aides.

"There are laws concerning the interrogation of children," Dean Grimm snapped. "She has a right to a guardian –"

Her sister cut her off. "Those laws don't apply to the Office of Special Inquisitions, Lilith. You know that." Side by side, the two women were disturbing in how alike they were. They wore different clothes, but other than that, their faces, their hair, their postures, their voices, were all identical.

Raspire turned on the Dean, and added, with a tight-lipped smile, "And I have the personal authorization of the Governor-General himself. I can do anything I feel is necessary."

"Anything within reason," Diana Grimm corrected him coolly. She put a hand on her sister's arm. "Lilith." She seemed to be trying to reassure the other woman. "We're just going to ask her some questions."

"You may go, Dean Grimm," said Raspire dismissively.

"She'll be fine." Diana Grimm spoke in a softer tone, as the Dean's eyes flashed angrily.

Lilith Grimm glanced in Alexandra's direction. Alexandra, by now, was feeling quite annoyed that these three had reached her bedside without even acknowledging that the subject of their conversation was right in front of them, listening to them debate over what could and couldn't be done to her. For a moment, the Dean's expression seemed to soften a little. Then she nodded stiffly, and turned on her heel and walked out of the infirmary.

"Hello, Alexandra," said Diana Grimm.

"Do you remember me, Miss Quick?" asked Mr. Raspire sternly.

Alexandra nodded.

The two adults pulled up chairs, and sat down next to her bed. Alexandra's jaw tightened, but she said nothing.

"Richard," said Ms. Grimm. "Let me. Please."

The bald warlock glanced at her, then nodded.

The older witch turned to Alexandra. "I know you're angry, and probably very confused. Is that a fair assessment?"

Alexandra nodded again.

"Whether you believe me or not," Ms. Grimm told her, "I don't want to make this more difficult or unpleasant than it has to be. The sooner you answer our questions, the sooner we'll be gone. You can make this quick and painless, or you can make it a trial for all of us. That's your choice, Alexandra."

"Fine," Alexandra answered, through clenched teeth. "But Dean Grimm was right. I don't remember anything."

"Can you tell us what's the last thing you do remember?"

Alexandra had been trying to figure that out herself. "Max and I, I think we..." She frowned.

"Yes?" Raspire prompted eagerly. Grimm shook her head at him.

"We were going to meet our father," Alexandra mumbled.

"About what?" Raspire demanded.

"I don't know!" Alexandra snapped. "I told you everything after the last time I spoke to him, in Roanoke." She glared at Ms. Grimm. "He

promised he'd speak to me again, but since you keep chasing him around, it's been kind of hard. Where's my brother?"

Ms. Grimm's gray eyes studied hers a while, before she spoke.

"Maximilian is dead, Alexandra."

Alexandra felt as if someone had just punched her in the stomach. She clenched her fists. "No," she whispered. "You're lying."

But though she struggled to remember what it was she and Maximilian had done last – she had some vague idea that there had been something very important they were going to do – she knew, down deep, that Ms. Grimm was telling the truth, and that somehow, she'd known it even before she heard the words. She shook her head.

"You and he disappeared for a week, and you came back with his wand," Diana Grimm told her. "Where were you?"

"I don't know," Alexandra replied thickly.

"You used the obol you stole from Darla Dearborn, didn't you?" Grimm asked.

"I don't remember."

"You went to the Underworld!" Raspire growled. "How did you come back? How?"

"I don't know! I don't remember!" Alexandra shouted. She gritted her teeth. She wanted to cry, and she desperately wanted not to cry. How could she mourn her brother when she didn't even understand how he had died? "How do you know he's dead?"

"The Mortality Clock his mother keeps, and his ancestors' ghosts told us," Grimm replied, speaking in a calm, even tone. "We've already sent his wand back to Chicago for the Trace Office to confirm that it is no longer kinned to a living wizard, but we're already sure... I'm sorry, Alexandra. I really am."

Alexandra looked down. She swallowed past a lump in her throat, and wiped at her eyes.

The Special Inquisitor seemed sympathetic, but that didn't keep them both from continuing to ask Alexandra questions she couldn't answer. She didn't know anything about the Lands Below, other than what she'd read in some book. She didn't know what had happened to Darla's obol. She didn't know how she'd been injured. She didn't know where she had been, or that she had been missing for a week and feared dead herself.

"Well," said Mr. Raspire, at last. "I believe you, Alexandra. But, I think just to be sure, there are a few more questions I want to ask you."

He reached into a vest pocket, and withdrew a vial of colorless liquid.

"Richard, I really don't think that's necessary," Ms. Grimm objected.

He gave her a thin smile. "I think it is." He handed the vial to Alexandra. "Drink this, Miss Quick."

Alexandra took it. "What is it?"

"Veritaserum." Ms. Grimm's tone was flat.

Alexandra stared at the vial, and then looked at the two Confederation wizards.

"What if I refuse?" she asked.

Ms. Grimm didn't blink, merely sat there with an unchanging expression.

Mr. Raspire smiled.

Glaring at him, Alexandra unstopped the vial, and poured its contents down her throat.

Raspire nodded approvingly. "Very good, Alexandra." She was infuriated by his smug, patronizing tone, but Alexandra struggled to

keep her own face as impassive as Ms. Grimm's. Raspire began questioning her again – mostly the same questions he'd already asked her. She found the answers tumbling from her lips, now, as if she couldn't wait to tell him everything; if she even briefly considered not answering, or lying, she blurted out the truth before she could think twice about withholding it.

But all of her answers were the same as before.

She was exhausted, tired, and hungry when they finished interrogating her.

“Incredible,” Raspire muttered, under his breath, as they rose to leave. “He Obliviated his own daughter.”

Alexandra turned away from them, and lay down in her bed, with her back to them.

Diana Grimm leaned over, and put a hand on her shoulder.

“I really am sorry, Alexandra,” she said, and then she and Raspire left.

Mrs. Murphy brought her dinner, and told her she was to stay in the infirmary until the next day. Alexandra nodded, and waited until the nurse left her alone before she listlessly ate her food, and then lay back down and closed her eyes.

She didn't make a sound, but every time she woke up that night, her eyes were damp.

Alexandra woke up before dawn the next morning. She stared up at the ceiling for a while, and then finally turned her head, and saw that a change of clothes had been brought from her room. She knew she wasn't going to fall back asleep, and she had no desire to keep lying there in the dark. She didn't see Mrs. Murphy around to stop her from leaving, so she slid out of bed, wincing as her feet hit the floor. It wasn't just the cold – the bottoms of her feet felt blistered and sore.

She paused, as she pulled off her gown, and wondered where her locket was. Hadn't she been wearing it? That thought sent a cold,

leaden sensation snaking through her stomach, though she wasn't sure why.

She got dressed, a bit clumsily with one wrist still wrapped tightly, and was about to leave the infirmary when Dean Grimm walked in.

"I don't think Mrs. Murphy has released you yet, Miss Quick," the Dean said.

Alexandra didn't even question how the Dean happened to be there as soon as she woke up.

"I want to check on Charlie," Alexandra told her. "And I really want a shower."

That was true, though what she really wanted was to get away from here, and the scrutiny of adults who knew more than she did about what was going on.

The infirmary was mostly dark; a lamp near the nurse's office shed light from behind Ms. Grimm, so Alexandra could only see half of her profile. The Dean nodded slowly.

"That's understandable."

"Are you going to Petrify me or expel me if I leave without permission?" Alexandra asked.

"Miss Quick, I know this is a terrible time for you, and I am not unsympathetic. But even your loss does not give you license to indulge in insolence and insubordination."

Alexandra looked away. She wasn't even really angry at Dean Grimm. She didn't know who to be angry at.

"You don't need to return to class immediately," the Dean said. Her voice almost sounded gentle. "And... I understand funeral arrangements for your brother are being made now." She paused. "I believe I can see to it that you are able to attend. You can make up your missed classwork."

Alexandra swallowed. Would Maximilian's mother and sister want her at Max's funeral? They would have questions for her, too – questions she couldn't answer. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“If you need to talk to someone, Miss Quick... My door is open. As is Dean Black's, of course, and I'm sure Mrs. Murphy or Ms. Shirliffe would also be more than willing to help you in any way they can.”

Alexandra nodded. She couldn't really see herself talking to any of them. “Won't I need permission from my mother, to go to Roanoke again?” Then another thought occurred to her. “You did let her know I'm all right, didn't you?”

Ms. Grimm cleared her throat. “We hadn't yet notified her that you were missing.”

Alexandra stared at the Dean.

“You understand, it can be difficult to explain things like this to Muggles,” Ms. Grimm continued. “This wasn't a situation where Muggle authorities could be of any help whatsoever. There was nothing she could do, and we couldn't even tell her –”

“So if my parents were wizards, you'd have told them, but since my mother is just a Muggle, no need to tell her anything? 'Cause it's not like she could send the police after you, or sue you.” Alexandra shook her head. “What if I never came back? How long would you have waited before deciding I was dead, and telling her that?”

Despite Alexandra's interruption, the Dean was actually quiet for a moment. “It's not a perfect system, Alexandra,” she said at last. “We do our best to integrate Muggle-borns into our world.”

Another time, Alexandra might have had an angry response to that. Right now, she wasn't in the mood to argue with Dean Grimm.

“Can I go?” she asked.

Ms. Grimm nodded, and stepped aside. "Do remember what I said, Miss Quick. If you need to talk."

It won't be with you, Alexandra thought, but she nodded and pushed through the doors of the infirmary with her good hand.

The warlock hanging over Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall looked surprised to see her, and he actually smiled. "Miss Quick! You've been missing!"

"So I've heard." She didn't want to talk to him either.

She reached the door to her room, took a deep breath, and opened it.

Anna was sleeping, until Charlie loudly cawed, "Alexandra!" and flapped into her arms.

Alexandra nuzzled the raven against her cheek. Anna sprang out of bed, and then almost knocked her over, wrapping her arms around Alexandra's waist and pressing her face against the taller girl's shoulder, sobbing.

"Easy, Anna," Alexandra said hoarsely. "You almost squashed Charlie."

"Alexandra!" Charlie repeated. "Pretty bird!"

"You've been missing for a week!" Anna wailed. "You said you and Max were just going to meet your father last weekend! Then I found out you and Max got in a fight with John Manuelito and Darla down in the basements! And there were all these rumors... Then WJD agents came to the school and interrogated me and everyone else who knew you! I had to tell them everything, and Dean Grimm threatened to expel me for not telling her in the first place!"

Alexandra sighed, and patted Anna on the back. A fight with John and Darla? She didn't remember that either. There was a huge block of time that was just... missing.

"I heard you were really hurt when they found you," Anna mumbled. She finally looked up at Alexandra, with tears streaking her face. "I thought you were dead."

"Max is dead," Alexandra said. The words felt unreal. She still felt empty. How could Max be dead? Hadn't she just spoken to him, the day before?

Anna turned pale. "I...I heard. I'm so sorry, Alex."

Her roommate finally let go of her, and Alexandra sat down slowly on her bed. She looked at Nigel's cage, and Anna said quickly, "I took care of Nigel. He tried to bite me. But I cleaned his cage, and fed him."

Alexandra nodded. "Thank you."

The door to the bathroom opened, and Angelique peeked her head through.

"Alexandra?" she inquired softly.

"Come on in, Angelique." Alexandra gestured at her wearily.

Darla's roommate stepped into their room, looking uncomfortable. Alexandra expected to hear some nasty comments from Honey, but the jarvey was silent – or Silenced.

"I heard about your brother," Angelique said, looking down. "I'm really sorry."

Alexandra nodded. "I don't remember. I don't remember anything that happened." The other two girls blinked at her in surprise. Alexandra ran her fingers through her hair, and then rested her head in her hands. "They said my father Obliviated me. So my brother's dead, and I don't remember anything. I don't remember a fight, I don't remember going to the Lands Below, I don't remember how I got back. Everyone's going to ask me questions, and I don't remember!"

She was staring at the floor, while Anna and Angelique looked at each other. Then Anna put a hand on her shoulder.

"We'll make sure no one bothers you. Right, Angelique?"

Angelique looked startled, then nodded. "Yes," she agreed.

"Where's Darla?" Alexandra mumbled.

The girls looked startled at this, too. Angelique cleared her throat. "She was expelled. Along with all the other Mors Mortis Society members."

"Thirteen students," said Anna.

"They found out which of us were part of it in the beginning of the year, too," Angelique mumbled. "We're on probation."

Alexandra shrugged. She didn't care if she was on probation. "I really want a shower. I feel like I haven't had one in days."

"Go ahead," Anna urged her.

"Take your time," Angelique said softly.

By the time she got out of the shower, the Pritchards were in her room, too, and Alexandra had to endure another round of hugs and tears, before they went to breakfast. David was waiting at the entrance to Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall, arguing with the warlock overhead. His face lit up when he saw Alexandra.

"Alex!"

"Hi, David." She was glad to see him, but couldn't muster a smile.

They looked at each other awkwardly for a moment.

"You don't have to hug me," Alexandra told him.

He looked relieved, and nodded. "I'm sorry about your brother." He looked down. "I don't know what to say."

"What you said is fine."

Conversations in the cafeteria died, and almost everyone stared at her, when she entered. Her friends surrounded her, though it didn't seem to be necessary. No one bothered her, except with whispers and muttering behind her back. She passed the table where the ninth grade boys sat. Larry Albo watched her quietly, but didn't say anything. The Rash twins gave her their usual sneers, but abruptly found their plates more interesting when Constance and Forbearance both stared them down.

Alexandra looked at the table where the BMI students were sitting, and felt a lump in her throat at the empty spot where Maximilian should have been. Her friends led her to their usual table, and they sat down silently.

Then the Stormcrows, along with the entire JROC contingent, rose from their seats, marched over, and sat down at the same table with her, surrounding her and her friends on both sides. Each of the BMI students approached her, and gave their condolences.

"We'll all be at your brother's funeral," said Mage-Sergeant Major Franklin. "Along with most of his class from BMI."

Alexandra nodded mutely.

Beatrice was in tears. So was Martin. Beatrice gave her a hug, which surprised her. Then Martin did, too. Alexandra would have been annoyed at this, except that Martin truly looked more distraught than her.

She was glad she didn't have to go to class that day. She couldn't bear much more sympathy mixed with suspicion and morbid curiosity.

She found out that Maximilian's funeral would be in three days' time. Alexandra didn't question the arrangements. If Dean Grimm said she could go, that was good enough for her. She couldn't even think

about what she'd say to her mother when she returned to Larkin Mills. Anna offered to cut class to stay with her, but Alexandra told her she would be fine.

Left alone in her room that day, she wrote a very short letter, addressed to Julia:

Dear Julia,

They told me I can come to Maximilian's funeral. I would like to, but I don't want to hurt you or your mother. I think somehow he died because of me, but I don't remember. I don't have any memories at all of what happened.

If you don't want me to come, just let me know, and I promise I won't bother you again.

Alexandra

She sent this by school owl to Croatoa, where she assumed Julia would be now.

Alexandra spent the next two days reading about Memory Charms and Obliviation in the library, and then, out of boredom, catching up with her lessons. She didn't care about the SPAWN, but studying was an easy way to distract her mind. As soon as classes ended, her friends would find her, and spend the rest of the afternoon and evening with her. At first they seemed nervous, unsure what to say, afraid of being too solicitous and afraid of being insensitive. They soon realized Alexandra was content just to have them spend time with her. They even played a few games of Wizardopoly and Heart of Three Kingdoms.

Anna had become increasingly worried as she watched her roommate, though Alexandra wasn't sure why. She kept insisting she was fine. Beatrice and Martin, and other members of the JROC, would also check on her every evening. Each time, Alexandra assured them, too, that she was fine.

The evening before she was to leave the next morning for the Chicago Wizzardrail station, an owl tapped at their window. Anna was in the room with her, and looked surprised when it wasn't Jingwei. Alexandra calmly untied the letter the owl carried, and gave the bird a treat. Her hands only shook a little when she opened it.

It was from Julia, and it said:

Dear Alexandra,

Of course Mother and I want you to come, and you will stay with us while you are here. Please don't be foolish.

Your sister,

Julia

Alexandra swallowed hard, as her eyes lingered on the closing line: Your sister.

"May I?" Anna asked softly, pointing at the letter.

Alexandra shrugged, and handed it to her. Anna read it, and looked up at her friend. She laid it carefully on Alexandra's desk, and smiled gently. "I'll help you pack," she said.

Alexandra didn't really have much to pack. She didn't expect to stay longer than a day or two. She was not looking forward to the long train ride, and she was particularly not looking forward to sharing a compartment with the five BMI students who had come to Charmbridge on the MASE program, with Maximilian. She didn't dislike any of them – not any more – but other than Beatrice and Martin, she didn't really know any of them well, and she didn't want to be the lone, bereaved little girl in a compartment full of older teens.

Unlike the Stormcrows, she did not travel in uniform. But she brought her uniform along, to wear to Maximilian's funeral. She also brought Charlie. She kept the bird cage door locked, and after she reacted to Charlie's initial objections with a curt reprimand and an ominous glare, the raven remained mostly quiet throughout the trip.

Beatrice and Martin sat on either side of her aboard the Roanoke Underhill. Beatrice would chat with her occasionally, telling her stories about Max from their years at BMI. The other Stormcrows offered to play Exploding Snap, and when Alexandra declined, they began playing Tarot Poker for pidges. When Alexandra no longer felt like talking, Beatrice read a book. Martin stared out the window, even when they went 'underhill' and there was nothing out there to see but darkness.

Throughout the trip, Alexandra felt detached and numb. It was only when they arrived at the Blacksburg Wizardrail station that her heart began thudding in her chest, as she filed out of the train with Maximilian's classmates, knowing that Julia and Ms. King would be waiting for her.

As if sensing her apprehension, Beatrice put a hand on her shoulder as they walked into the station.

Alexandra saw Ms. King first. Maximilian's mother was standing near the exit, dressed in black. Black robes, black gloves, a high-collared black cloak, and a black scarf covering her hair. Alexandra approached her nervously, but Julia stepped out from behind her mother, also dressed in black. With her hair tied back in a severe bun, and no makeup, her black robes had the effect of making her face look even more terribly pale. Her eyes were red, and she was holding a handkerchief.

She tucked this into a pocket, and then rushed over to embrace Alexandra. She said nothing, only trembled. Alexandra put her arms around her half-sister, and couldn't think of anything to say.

"We'd all like to express our deepest condolences, ma'am," said Mage-Sergeant Major Tybalt Franklin, as the Stormcrows stood stiffly before Maximilian's family. "Maximilian was our friend and classmate, and we know... whatever happened, he was brave and honorable, to the end."

"Thank you," Ms. King said quietly, nodding to the leader of the Stormcrows. Julia burst into tears, and so did Martin.

"We'll see you tomorrow, at the funeral," Beatrice told Alexandra, with a sad smile. "But if you need anything at all, just send an owl... or your raven."

Alexandra nodded. "Thank you, Beatrice."

The Stormcrows marched off – they would be quartered at BMI, Alexandra had been told – and Ms. King led Alexandra and Julia outside, to ride the Thestral-drawn carriage to Croatoa.

Croatoa was a house in mourning, but the Kings were so considerate towards Alexandra, it made her feel guilty to be there. Ms. King remained poised and genteel at all times, but Alexandra could tell the woman was forcing herself to look after her daughter and her guest, while shouldering a crippling burden of grief. Myrta Applegate and Samuel Hunter both came by to check on the family, looking as sad as everyone else.

If the house-elves had been solicitous on Alexandra's last visit, they were positively falling over themselves now to make sure none of the witches had to so much as lift a finger. When they weren't waiting on someone, they were bursting into tears. Alexandra couldn't bear to send Deezie away, even though the weeping house-elf was all but glued to her leg now.

Julia cried most of the time, too. She hugged Alexandra constantly, and assured her that it wasn't her fault and that no one blamed her. She only asked once what Alexandra remembered, and Alexandra guiltily told her that she remembered nothing. Julia accepted that. They sat in her room, and Julia asked all about what Maximilian had been doing at Charmbridge. She wanted every memory she could get of her lost brother, Alexandra realized, so she did her best to oblige, talking about the JROC, and their excursions with Martin and Beatrice to practice flying and wizard-dueling.

She didn't tell Julia about the Mors Mortis Society, though. She waited until that evening, when Julia turned in early, and then she went downstairs to find Ms. King.

The bereaved mother was in one of the mansion's sitting rooms. She must have banished the house-elves from her presence, because she was alone when Alexandra knocked on the door, and Deezie and Rolly, who had both followed her downstairs, remained outside when Ms. King bade her enter.

As she did, Alexandra saw the Mortality Clock sitting on the mantel. It had three hands, labeled 'Thalia,' 'Julia,' and 'Maximilian.' Instead of numbers, its positions were marked by words in colored boxes: 'Hearty and Hale,' 'Peaked and Pale,' all the way down to 'On Death's Door.'

And then there was a narrow black wedge with no words on it at all, and that's where Maximilian's hand now pointed. Alexandra swallowed, thinking how terrible it must have been for Ms. King to see her son's hand swing to that spot.

Ms. King had a large stone bowl on a table in front of her. Alexandra saw that the bowl was filled with a glistening, silvery liquid. She was puzzled by this – was Maximilian's mother performing some sort of ritual? She bit her lip, holding back questions, but Ms. King smiled and gestured at the bowl.

"This is called a Pensieve," she told her. "Have you ever seen one before?"

Alexandra shook her head, staring at the glistening film on the surface of the water. It seemed to shine with its own light.

"Lower your face into the water," Ms. King instructed her. "Go ahead – it's all right, I assure you. You can hold your breath if you like, though you don't need to. But keep your eyes open."

Alexandra hesitated, and then slowly leaned forward, and dunked her face into the basin.

At first, she only saw the bottom of the bowl, and then, it was as if she were tumbling down, through a window in the sky and onto a grassy hillside, which she immediately recognized as the meadow below the King mansion.

And she was standing next to Ms. King, who looked a little bit younger, and not quite as heavy, and Samuel Hunter, who looked almost exactly as he had this morning.

“Only around the meadow,” said Ms. King. “And no flying.”

“Yes, Mother,” replied Maximilian.

Alexandra gasped. It was a much younger Maximilian who was sitting astride a beautiful Granian. He couldn't have been more than eight years old.

“I want to ride, too!” howled a little girl whom Alexandra hadn't noticed until now. The pretty, dark-haired girl standing a few yards away, with the tall grass of the meadow coming up to her knees, looked about five. “I want to ride Misoo!”

“I told you that it will be your turn later, Julia,” said Ms. King. “We promised Maximilian his first solo ride today.” And she added, in a very firm voice: “Young witches who behave in a disagreeable manner get sent inside with the house-elves.”

Julia closed her mouth, sniffled, and looked as if she might burst with indignation.

“All right, young man,” said Mr. Hunter. “Take 'er easy now.”

Maximilian set off on the back of the Granian, riding easily down the hill, and then letting the horse break into a canter as they reached the bottom and circled around.

As they came back up the hill, on the opposite side of the meadow, the Granian began to run faster and faster, and spread its wings.

Maximilian laughed with delight.

“Control her, boy!” yelled Mr. Hunter.

“Maximilian!” Ms. King called, sounding only a little bit anxious.

But the Granian took off, and Maximilian rode it in a circle overhead, soaring almost all the way back up to the mansion, before descending back to the meadow, to land three horse-lengths from the adults.

He knew he was in trouble immediately, of course. His eager face, flushed with excitement, became downcast as his mother began scolding him and Mr. Hunter took the reins from his hands. Julia was smiling the kind of smile that could only come from a little sister watching her big brother get in trouble.

The scene faded, and then Alexandra was standing in front of Maximilian and Ms. King again. This time, she recognized the Blacksburg Wizardrail station. A slightly older Julia was almost at her elbow, though the other girl was still no more aware of Alexandra's presence than the others were. Maximilian now looked almost Alexandra's age. He was young and handsome, standing proudly in what was obviously a brand new BMI uniform.

"I expect to receive an owl at least once a week," his mother told him. "And more often than that would not be unwelcome."

Maximilian replied, "Yes, Mother," but looked as if he were trying not to roll his eyes.

A bus with a sign saying 'Blacksburg Magery Institute' was pulling into the roundabout in front of the train station, and Alexandra could see many other young boys and girls in uniform, brand new wands who had not yet earned the right to call themselves 'Stormcrows,' waiting nervously.

"Well," sighed Ms. King. She smiled. Speaking in a much lower voice, she murmured, "I love you, Maximilian."

"IloveyoutooMother," he mumbled in a rush, under his breath, his eyes darting side to side, fearful that one of the other BMI students might hear him.

“Don't worry,” said Ms. King, with a twinkle in her eye. “I won't embarrass you by doing something horrible, like hugging my own s—”

Julia, Alexandra noticed, had been sniffing, wiping at her eyes with a handkerchief, and just as the doors of the BMI bus opened and a rough-looking squad of older Stormcrows spilled out and began bellowing commands at the terrified youngsters, Maximilian's sister wailed, “I'm going to miss you, Max!” And she threw herself at her brother, wrapping her arms around him and weeping, immediately drawing the attention of every student at the station.

This scene swirled and dissolved, and Alexandra was now in a room alone with Ms. King and a baby. Her hostess was lying in a large bed, in what Alexandra guessed to be her bedroom here at Croatoa. Ms. King looked significantly younger now, and very tired.

The infant in her arms was clearly newborn. For the first time, Alexandra felt uncomfortably like a voyeur, when she realized that Ms. King was holding the baby to her bare breast, nursing.

Then the bedroom door opened.

“Sir,” came the high, squeaky voice of an elf. “Sir, please sir, momma and baby is resting —”

“Thalia,” said Abraham Thorn, with a smile of delight, as he stepped through the doorway.

“It's all right, Nina,” Ms. King called, in a weary voice. (But she would be 'Mrs. Thorn' now, Alexandra recalled.)

“Poor, stubborn creatures,” sighed Alexandra's father, closing the door. He walked over to the new mother's bedside. He knelt, and gazed with adoration at the nursing infant. Abraham Thorn looked younger, too, though not much changed, other than that there was no trace of gray in his hair, and there were no lines on his face, which he now turned towards his wife. “I'm sorry I wasn't here, Thalia. I know I said I would be, but there was a very important vote on the Majokai

issue, and those paleo-pagans from Mesa were threatening to curse _”

“Abraham,” interrupted Thalia Thorn. “I’m sure it was very important, but you really cannot imagine how much I don’t care about the Wizards’ Congress right now.”

Her husband bowed his head. “Of course. Forgive me, my darling.”

She smiled, and ran a hand gently through his hair, while the other cradled the baby at her breast.

“So,” she murmured. “Are you going to say hello to your son?”

Abraham Thorn beamed with pride, and leaned forward, to very gently kiss the back of the baby’s head.

“My son,” he breathed. “My beloved son. My Maximilian.”

Alexandra pulled her head out of the bowl, and breathed heavily.

Ms. King was smiling at her sadly.

“Those were... memories,” Alexandra murmured.

Ms. King nodded. “A Pensieve allows you to store memories... take them out of your head for a little while, to give you peace of mind. Or so that you can experience them at leisure, as often as you like. Even share them.”

Alexandra swallowed. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Ms. King patted the sofa she was sitting on, and Alexandra came around the table, to sit next to her.

“Was there something you wanted to talk about?” the older witch asked.

Alexandra looked down at her hands. "You know that I... don't have any memories, about what happened. The Inquisitors said my... my father, Obliviated me."

Ms. King nodded. "I know," she said softly. "You obviously saw things Abraham didn't want you to tell the Inquisitors."

"But I do remember a few things I didn't tell Julia," Alexandra muttered. "Things I... I think you have a right to know. I don't know if this is what got Maximilian killed. I don't know how I was involved, but..."

Ms. King waited patiently, and Alexandra told her about the Mors Mortis Society, and what Maximilian had told her about his mission, for the Wizard Justice Department. She remembered telling Abraham Thorn about this, too.

When she finished, Ms. King just pressed her lips together, then patted Alexandra's hand, and squeezed it.

"Thank you for telling me that, Alexandra," she said. "I'm not sure what I will do about it, if anything." She sighed, and shook her head. "They turned my own son into an underage Inquisitor. I think they should be more worried about what his father will do when he finds out." She looked at Alexandra again.

"I'm sure it wasn't your fault, Alexandra. Your involvement was probably accidental. I doubt Abraham would have wanted you put in danger."

Alexandra nodded, though she was unconvinced. She still felt as if she were at fault. Maybe she would always feel that way, not knowing the truth.

"Are you angry at your father?" the other witch asked.

Alexandra looked at her, surprised. She licked her lips. "I... I don't know. I feel like I should be. I'm just not sure why."

Ms. King nodded. "I feel the same way. You asked me last time, if I were angry at him. Well, I don't think I can ever forgive him for outliving his son. But I don't... I don't want my anger to poison you or J-Julia..."

She squeezed her eyes shut, and Alexandra reached out, tentatively, and Ms. King pulled her against her and embraced her.

Even the portraits in the house were in mourning. They watched Julia and Alexandra somberly as they passed up and down the hallways, and Alexandra half-expected 'Great-Aunt Virginia' to tell her that she wasn't dressed appropriately for mourning, but the old witch said nothing.

Alexandra looked out her window, that night, and saw ghosts holding vigil, down by the trees.

A thought came to her, then, and she ran to Julia's room and knocked on her door.

Julia opened it – she had supposedly gone to bed, and her room was dark, but she was red-eyed, and obviously had not been sleeping.

"Julia..." Alexandra swallowed. She wasn't sure how to ask this. Her sister looked at her, then caused a lamp to light, with a tap of her wand, and bade Alexandra enter. She sat down on her bed, and Alexandra sat next to her.

"I was just wondering..." Alexandra looked down at her hands. "Absalom Thorn is our great-great-great-great grandfather, right?"

Julia nodded, looking a little puzzled.

"And there are other ghosts down there, who are your ancestors? Family?"

"Yes," Julia replied, frowning a little.

"At Charmbridge..." Alexandra hesitated. "Diana Grimm told me that your family's ghosts confirmed Maximilian is dead."

Julia reached out and took her hand. "Our family," she said softly. "Yes. Alexandra..."

"How did they know?"

Julia looked as if she knew where this was leading. "I don't know exactly," she replied quietly, "but I think ghosts just know, when their kin have crossed over. They were all wizards; they can't cast spells any more, but there is some magic they take with them into the afterlife. But –"

"Maybe Max is down there!" Alexandra whispered. She felt her eyes burn, and she couldn't say any more, past the lump in her throat. But the possibility of being able to see Max again – even as a ghost – was something she desperately hoped for.

Tears ran down Julia's cheeks, and she shook her head.

"He's not," she said, as she wiped at her eyes. "Most of us just... move on, when we die, Alex. And... I know why you'd think that Max might not, why you'd hope for that. Part of me did, too. I hoped for it, and I was afraid of that at the same time. Max was so – so strong-willed, and he wanted to protect his mother, and his sisters, so much..." Her voice broke, and she had to take several breaths before she could continue. "If anyone would be stubborn enough to stay behind, it would be him."

But he didn't, Alexandra thought. He didn't stay behind. He left us.

Julia seemed to sense what Alexandra was thinking, and she slipped her arms around the younger girl, and pulled her close. "But you wouldn't really want that, Alexandra," she whispered in her sister's ear. "Ghosts are unhappy souls. They're trapped on earth long after whatever business held them here is over. They can never be at peace. You wouldn't really want that for Max, would you?"

Alexandra shook her head. She felt terrible that she had wanted it.

"It's all right, Alex," Julia murmured. "It's all right." She rocked her half-sister gently, comforting herself more than she was comforting Alexandra.

The next morning was the funeral. Since there was no body, there were no remains to take to the family crypt, so the memorial was being held at the Blacksburg Magery Institute. It wasn't just because Maximilian had spent the last six years of his life there, and that all of his friends were there, Ms. King had explained, but also the fact that, now that everyone knew that he had been Abraham Thorn's son, there would be intense public interest in the circumstances of his death. The Commandant of BMI had promised that they could keep reporters and other unwelcome guests off the school grounds.

Julia wore a straight black robe, a pointed hat, long black gloves, and a veil. Alexandra was dressed in her JROC uniform. She had strictly forbidden Deezie to touch it, and spent an hour that morning making sure that every crease, every button, every pin and ribbon, was impeccably arranged.

They all ate a very light breakfast. Ms. King seemed lost in thought – which was hardly unexpected. But Alexandra was a little surprised when she told the house-elves to clear the table, and then requested, "May I speak to you in the sitting room, Alexandra?"

Alexandra exchanged a look with Julia, who raised her eyebrows and gave a tiny shrug, shaking her head.

"Yes, ma'am," Alexandra replied, and rose from the table to follow Ms. King into the same room where they had spoken the previous night.

Ms. King closed the doors behind her, and sat on the other side of the table again. She had put away the Pensieve, so Alexandra wasn't sure what this about. Ms. King gestured for her to take a seat in the stuffed chair opposite her, and Alexandra did.

The woman studied her a moment, and Alexandra had the horrible thought that maybe she had done something wrong. Maybe Maximilian's mother didn't want her to attend his funeral after all. Then Ms. King said, "You know that Aurors and Inquisitors will be

plentiful at the ceremony. Whether you see them or not, they'll be watching you – all of us.”

Alexandra nodded. “I figured.” She hesitated. “You don't think... he'll come, do you?” Even disguised with Polyjuice Potion, she thought it would be a bad idea for her father to show up.

“I doubt it. I think he will be watching, one way or another. But no, I don't expect he'll appear.” Ms. King was still looking at her in a way Alexandra couldn't decipher. Then she opened a tiny drawer in the table in front of her. “I received... a delivery, very early this morning. For you.” She withdrew from the drawer a glass vial.

“A delivery?” Alexandra's forehead wrinkled in confusion.

“There was no note, or explanation, only your name. But I am fairly certain what this is, and who sent it.”

Alexandra looked at the vial Ms. King held in her hand. It was filled with a viscous, silvery liquid, much like what she had seen in the Pensieve the night before.

“You were interrogated, by the Office of Special Inquisitions,” Ms. King stated. “And they determined that your father Obliviated you.”

Alexandra nodded, licking her lips nervously.

“I think,” Ms. King said slowly, “that he did not.”

Alexandra's eyes were drawn to the shimmering liquid in the vial. “I don't understand.”

“I think that he took your memories from you, so that the Inquisitors couldn't pry them out of you. But he didn't destroy them. He hid them away, until such time as they could be returned to you.”

Alexandra's eyes widened. Now she was almost hypnotized by what was swirling in the vial that the older witch held.

“He must not be expecting you to be interrogated again, at least by means of Legilimency or Veritaserum,” Ms. King went on. “Or else whatever it was he didn't want you to tell the Inquisitors will no longer make a difference. But all the same... it would probably be best not to let anyone know that your memories have been returned to you.”

Alexandra swallowed, and concentrated on stilling the roar of confusing thoughts in her head.

“Assuming that you want them returned, that is,” Ms. King added.

Alexandra's head snapped up. She finally broke her gaze away from the vial, and looked at Ms. King again.

“Of course I want them back!” she said hoarsely.

“Alexandra.” Ms. King's voice was very soft. “I assume that whatever is in here –” She held up the vial. “It involves Maximilian's death. You – may well have seen him die. Whatever happened, it might be... unpleasant.”

“Don't you want to know?” Alexandra asked.

Ms. King looked at the vial. “I thought about it,” she admitted. “I thought about using the Pensieve, first.” She shook her head. “You can, you know. You can use it to see what these memories are, and then decide whether you want to keep them –”

“I want them!” Alexandra declared vehemently. She paused, abashed at her sharp tone, but Ms. King was unfazed. Alexandra looked away. “They're my memories! Whatever happened, I have a right to them, and he had no right to take them from me! Whatever happened, it happened and I was there and I have to live with it. I want them!” She felt her eyes stinging with anger now.

Ms. King nodded. “Come here, then,” she said gently.

Alexandra rose from the chair, and moved to sit next to the large woman on the sofa, who unstoppered the vial, and dipped her wand into it.

“This won't hurt,” she promised. “But it will feel very strange.”

Sticky silver threads stretched from the end of her wand as she removed it from the vial, and then she pressed the tip against the younger witch's temple, and Alexandra gasped as memories poured into her head.

In Memoriam

Alexandra sat on the sofa for a long time, doubled over and shaking. Ms. King rubbed her back gently, but didn't say anything.

We'll be late to the ceremony, Alexandra thought, at last, and she took several deep breaths before sitting up.

"Do you want to know?" she asked quietly.

Ms. King's face was pale and still. She seemed to be thinking about it, then she shook her head.

"Only one thing," she whispered. For the first time, her composure seemed near breaking. "Did he... did he suffer?"

Alexandra swallowed, and shook her head. "No." Her voice was barely audible. "I'm pretty sure he didn't."

Ms. King studied her, perhaps trying to determine whether she was telling the truth, then nodded. "Thank you." She put her arms around Alexandra, and squeezed her tightly.

Alexandra couldn't return the embrace. "You don't want to know..."

"Who was responsible?" Ms. King murmured. "Who to blame? I think I know who to blame."

"But –"

"Is there anything about what happened that will comfort me, or Julia?" Ms. King asked.

Alexandra thought about that, with her mind still reeling from memories of the Lands Below, and the last terrible sight she had of Maximilian, disappearing into the Lands Beyond.

"He saved me," she whispered. "If he hadn't died, I would have. He sacrificed himself for me."

She waited for Maximilian's mother to push her away, to look at her hatefully, to tell her that she should have been the one who died. But Ms. King just cupped the side of her face, and ran a thumb down Alexandra's cheek, gently brushing away a tear.

"You poor child," she murmured. "Alexandra, forgive me. It's you who needs to talk about what happened."

Alexandra shook her head. "You were right. It would be better if I didn't."

"Better for your father, perhaps. But not better for you." Ms. King sighed, and closed her eyes. "We must leave now."

Alexandra nodded.

"Promise me you will not try to keep all this contained within yourself. Come talk to me, when we return here tonight. Or if not me, promise you will talk to someone."

Alexandra bit her lip. Who could she tell about the Lands Below? Anyone she told would be at risk of being interrogated by Inquisitors.

"I will," she promised, but she had no idea who she would talk to.

They rode onto the grounds of the Blacksbury Magery Institute in a Thestral-drawn carriage, escorted by Regimental Officers and older students, all wearing crisp, dark uniforms beneath formal robes. At another time, Alexandra would have been excited and curious; now, she only took note in passing of the rows of brick and stone structures scattered across the large campus, so different from Charmbridge's single, seven-sided building. Uniformed students were everywhere, marching between classes and coming to attention as the officers passed by. Alexandra and the Kings were pulled along a road winding through the academy. They passed by a tall, black, stone tower, and Alexandra saw what appeared to be a troll chained to its base. She wondered about that, briefly, and then turned her attention to the parade field, where Maximilian's memorial service would be held.

His classmates had been given permission to attend, and there were rows of Stormcrows in neat, perfect lines. She saw Beatrice and Martin up front. Their eyes were straight ahead, and they could not acknowledge her, but she was sure they'd seen her.

Alexandra was numb throughout most of the ceremony. Officers in uniforms and teachers in robes spoke of what an outstanding student and promising mage Maximilian King had been. Alexandra listened to the speeches while looking around, wondering if her father was in attendance. Could he be invisible? Or perhaps there was a raven sitting in those trees across the field. She saw several adults who were wearing nondescript robes, scattered here and there among the attendees, and she knew they were probably Aurors. She didn't see anyone she recognized, though. She was glad Diana Grimm had not come, or worse, Mr. Raspire.

The BMI band played, the eleventh grade class cast a fiery tribute into the air with their wands, and Julia clung to Alexandra's arm and wept quietly.

The three bereaved witches had to stand in a reception line, as those who had known Maximilian came by and gave their condolences. Alexandra thought many of them were more curious than sympathetic; she sensed them studying her and Julia. Some looked nervous; some were too frightened to approach. She was sure that they were whispering about her, wondering about the role she'd played in her brother's death. Rumors were running wild back at Charmbridge, and surely they would be here, too.

Beatrice, when she reached the front of the line, embraced Alexandra, Julia, and Ms. King, each in turn, and cried openly. Alexandra was relieved that Martin seemed to have gotten his own tears under control. He gave Julia a quick hug, and shook Ms. King's hand, and then stood in front of Alexandra.

Face to face with the handsome older boy, Alexandra saw how grief-stricken Martin truly was by the loss of his best friend.

"Maximilian and I," he said, "we were... we were really close. I know you think I'm a... what's that Muggle word you keep using? Jerk?"

Alexandra shook her head. "No. You're not a jerk."

Martin smiled, for the first time she could recall since Maximilian's death. "Yes, I am. But if you ever need anything – I mean it." He looked at Alexandra's sister. "You, too, Julia. If either of you ever need anything, I swear to you, as an officer and a wizard, I will do anything I can to help you. Max..." His voice choked up. "Max would want me to."

"Thank you, Martin," Julia sniffed, and wrapped her arms around his neck, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

Alexandra nodded. "Thank you."

All of these people are going to miss you, Max, she thought. You never had to be afraid of being Abraham Thorn's son.

"Alexandra, Julia," called Ms. King. The two girls turned, to see three other witches standing at her side. Alexandra had noticed them taking seats nearby, during the ceremony, but she had assumed they were BMI staff, or perhaps Inquisitors.

All three women looked like they were in their twenties. Two of them were blondes, of exactly the same height. One had straight hair, and her face was radiant, suffused by Glamour Charms; the other wore her hair in curly braids, and her face was less made up. They seemed quite different at first glance, but Alexandra realized after looking at them for a moment that they were twins.

The third witch was a little younger, and shorter and plumper than the first two. She had curly brown hair, tied back away from her face. Despite her heavier figure and darker hair, Alexandra could see enough resemblance to guess that she was sister to the twins.

"Those are the Whites," Julia murmured in Alexandra's ear. "Father's daughters by his second wife." She paused. "I've only met Lucilla and Drucilla a couple of times, and I think this is the first time I've ever seen Valeria."

Alexandra nodded, and walked over to be introduced to three more half-sisters.

“We always meant to come visit properly,” said Lucilla, one of the twins, as they each took turns embracing Julia, and then Alexandra. “But we only got to meet Maximilian a few times, over the years. We had lunch with him, a couple of years ago, when we happened to be in Roanoke.”

“He was a wonderful young man,” added Drucilla, the twin with the plain face and the braided hair. “We should have gotten to know our brother better.”

“I’ll always regret that I never got a chance to meet him,” sighed Valeria. She was only a little taller than Alexandra. She held her youngest half-sister out at arm’s length to examine her, with a sad smile. “I’ve been in Europe for the last five years, and I only happened to be visiting my family this month, when we heard about Maximilian. I’m very glad to meet you, too, Alexandra, and I’m so sorry it’s under these circumstances.”

Under any other circumstances, Alexandra would have been thrilled to meet three more sisters. Now, it was too much, and she felt like she should be asking questions, trying to make conversation and get to know them, when all she really wanted was to get away from all these people and the need to remain composed and sociable. But she imagined that Ms. King felt the same way, only much worse, so she nodded and accepted the White sisters’ condolences.

Ms. King invited them all back to Croatoa, of course, but the Whites declined, with profuse apologies. Valeria was flying back to Europe the next morning – by Muggle airplane – so the three of them were returning to New England that evening. Their own mother was expecting them.

They all ate lunch together, at the BMI Officer’s Club. It was a plush, luxurious dining room, quite different from the Spartan cafeteria Alexandra glimpsed downstairs where the students ate. There were no house-elves or Clockworks that Alexandra could see; instead, BMI

students in fancy white uniforms waited on the officers and distinguished visitors.

Alexandra wasn't sure what she was supposed to say. She had never been to a funeral before. She had never lost anyone close to her before. And she felt as if all the memories of the past week had been picked up and shaken, and were still swirling around in her head, waiting to settle down. She felt numb, and Julia, still coping with her grief less gracefully than her mother, said little.

For Lucilla, Drucilla, and Valeria, their father's other children had apparently been incidental branches of their family tree, with whom they loosely stayed in touch, but had never become close. Alexandra heard them mention other half-siblings; they had a stepfather, and a family they had grown up with, and their real father had always been a nearly invisible presence in their lives.

No one talked much about Abraham Thorn.

She answered her half-sisters' questions about Charmbridge, and her home in Larkin Mills, and managed to muster enough curiosity to ask about Artificing. It seemed to involve the production of enchanted artifacts, everything from brooms to Clockworks to Portkeys, and even more complex creations. Lucilla and Drucilla told Alexandra that if she were interested, she could apprentice with them, any summer.

Valeria told them she was a Historicist. Alexandra thought that sounded like a rather dull occupation for a witch, but politely asked what kind of history she studied.

"The kind I can't study here," Valeria replied. "Only a few Territories in the Confederation have Historical Departments, and none of them are going to hire a daughter of Abraham Thorn."

Alexandra found this puzzling – why would the Wizard Justice Department care about Abraham Thorn's daughters studying history? It seemed like one of the more innocuous things they could do.

It was intriguing enough to penetrate her grief and numbness, and she would have asked more questions, but no one else seemed

interested, and Alexandra didn't think showing enthusiasm for some off-limits academic subject would do anything but make this lunch more painful for Julia and Ms. King. Valeria seemed to sense her curiosity, though, and wrote down an address and – to Alexandra's surprise – a phone number and email address as well.

“I don't check them often,” Valeria warned her. “An International Owl will probably reach me faster, even across the Atlantic. But I have found Muggle computers useful for some things.”

“Valeria has always been quite the radical,” Drucilla commented, with a smile. The Historicist snorted at her older sister, while Alexandra wondered what made Valeria a 'radical.' Maybe the fact that she even deigned to touch a Muggle device.

Too many new things to think about, at a time when she didn't want to think about anything.

The Whites were nice enough. Alexandra did hope to see them again, someday. She didn't think they were going to go out of their way to stay in touch.

She didn't see Beatrice or Martin again, as she left Blacksburg with Ms. King and Julia. She was returning to Chicago by Wizardrail the next day. She didn't know whether or not the Stormcrows would be on the same train, but she rather hoped they wouldn't be.

Although the memorial service was over, there was one more thing to be done. Ms. King had explained it to Alexandra when they were crossing the water to the mainland, that morning.

“Maximilian will have a marker at the BMI cemetery,” said his mother. “But that will not be his true grave site.”

So when they returned to Croatoa, Ms. King led Julia and Alexandra down the hill from the mansion on foot, and into the woods. Charlie – whom Alexandra had confined in a cage and left in the care of Deezie when she went to Blacksburg – was still a little miffed at her, and refused to remain perched on her shoulder. The raven fluttered from branch to branch, cawing occasionally, as they proceeded through

the woods. Alexandra thought about telling her familiar to be quiet, but Ms. King and Julia didn't seem to mind, so she allowed the bird to keep announcing their presence.

The forested part of the island was nearly as dark and spooky by day as it was by night. Alexandra did not mention her previous trip through these woods, and allowed Ms. King to believe she had never seen their destination before. Julia held out her hand – not fearfully, but for solace – and Alexandra took it gladly.

“Mother... and Max... have only taken me to the family crypt once before,” Julia murmured.

Alexandra nodded. Ms. King was casually clearing a path for them, sweeping her wand and Vanishing brambles and vines so they could walk unimpeded through the trees. When the stone mausoleum loomed ahead, Ms. King paused, and Alexandra saw several ghostly figures before them, dimmer by day but still visible.

“Are you here to inter Maximilian?” asked one of the ghosts. It sounded like Absalom Thorn.

“His name belongs in the crypt, though there is no body to inter,” replied Ms. King.

Julia, who had mostly held back tears since they'd left Blacksburg, suppressed a choking sob, and Alexandra squeezed her hand.

The ghosts seemed to accept this. Ms. King proceeded into the small clearing around the crypt, and the girls followed. Alexandra saw her great-great-great-great-grandfather, and several other ghosts, standing by the entrance.

“Stay here, Charlie,” she commanded, and Charlie landed on the stone arch above the entrance, without a sound.

Julia took a deep breath, before they entered. Ms. King's wand cast light on the stone sarcophagi and the names and dates inscribed on the walls, above niches and alcoves. The ghosts followed them inside. In the crypt, the details of their faces and clothing could be seen

clearly. The Thorn ancestors looked solemnly and sympathetically upon the three witches who had intruded upon their resting place. Alexandra could see tears running down Julia's face again.

Ms. King chose a bare spot above one of the empty niches, near the entrance, and pointed her wand. Alexandra could not hear the words she muttered, but the stone glowed as if being heated from within, and then brilliant fiery letters burst across its surface. As soon as the letters appeared, the glow faded, and Alexandra saw what Maximilian's mother had inscribed:

In Memoriam

Maximilian Alexander Thorn

Beloved son of Abraham Everard Thorn and Thalia Agatha King

Born on the Third of July, MCMXCII

Passed Beyond in May, MMIX

I still don't even know the exact date, Alexandra thought bitterly. She only remembered three days in the Lands Below, but she had returned a week after they'd left.

Ms. King bowed her head, and they all stood silently for a while.

"He will be remembered," Absalom Thorn intoned, at last. "We shall all remember him. Let your minds be at ease, that he has found peace in the hereafter, as we have not."

Ms. King nodded, and with a tear in her eye, held out one hand to Julia, and the other to Alexandra. The two girls took her hands, and they exited the crypt.

Alexandra looked at the ghost of Absalom Thorn, and her other ancestors, as they walked past, and reflected on what he had said.

Peace? She thought about her last sight of Maximilian, disappearing into a black void from which no one could return – not even as a ghost, apparently. Was that peace? Was she supposed to believe that Maximilian was living happily in some afterlife? That the Lands Beyond were just another great adventure, in a world beyond this one?

She didn't believe that. She hoped Maximilian was at peace, but her mind was not at ease.

She let Deezie pack all her clothes that night, while she stared out the window, at the darkness surrounding the island. No ghosts appeared at the tree line this night. She wondered if perhaps her father were out there in the woods at this moment, paying his respects to Maximilian. She was tempted to run out there and find the crypt again, and demand answers from Absalom Thorn, and if she found her father there, from him, too.

Instead, she exited her room, walked across the hall, and knocked on Julia's door.

"Come in," Julia said quietly, from within, and Alexandra opened the door, to find her sister sitting in a chair by her vanity, with her back to the door, while Olina stood on a stool behind her, weaving her hair into fine braids.

"I don't want to go back to Salem," Julia murmured, looking at Alexandra in the mirror. "I don't think Mother should be alone right now. But she insists we both go back to school tomorrow."

"Mistress King will not be alone, Miss Julia," Olina said, in a tremulous voice. "We house-elves will take good care of Mistress."

"I know you will, Olina," Julia sighed. She held out her wand, and tried to conjure another chair for Alexandra to sit in, but all that appeared was four wooden legs, which stood straight up for a moment, and then fell to the carpet.

Before she could do anything else, Deezie appeared, with a chair, and then Rolly appeared, scooped up the chair legs, and disappeared with them.

Grateful for the elves' efficiency, Alexandra sat down and thanked Deezie. She cleared her throat, as Julia looked at her expectantly, with a sad half-smile.

"Can I talk to you?" Alexandra asked, in a quiet voice.

Julia's eyebrows went up. "Of course you can! Why else are you here – oh." She glanced at Olina, in the mirror, and Deezie, at Alexandra's side, and then back at Alexandra.

"They really are part of the family, you know," Julia murmured, indicating the house-elves. "They miss M-Max... as much as we do." Julia swallowed, while fat tears ran down Olina's face, and then she continued. "And they'll keep our confidences. House-elves don't gossip."

"Never!" Olina declared. Deezie was shaking her head violently.

"I believe you," Alexandra said. "But –" She took a deep breath.

"It's all right." Julia smiled, and took Alexandra's hands. She looked over her shoulder at Olina. "Leave us, please."

"Yes, Miss," Olina croaked. She disappeared with a crack, and a blink of an eye later, so did Deezie.

"I hope I didn't hurt their feelings," Alexandra said, looking down.

"No." Julia shook her head. "They understand. What did you want to talk about, Alexandra?"

Alexandra looked up at her sister. "I was wondering..." She paused. "Wizarding portraits... I know they aren't really the actual person, but..."

Julia closed her eyes, and squeezed Alexandra's hands, while she shook her head. "There's no portrait of Maximilian, Alex. They're almost never painted for someone Max's... age, and you can't enchant one after the wizard has already died."

"Oh," Alexandra replied, disappointed. She took another deep breath. "There's something else I need to tell you."

Julia opened her eyes. They creased slightly, as she waited expectantly.

“I... remember,” Alexandra whispered.

Julia looked puzzled for a moment, and then her eyes widened in comprehension.

Alexandra didn't let go of her sister's hands, as she told Julia how she and Maximilian had journeyed to the Lands Below, and how Maximilian had died. She knew telling Julia was risky. They'd both have to worry about being interrogated by Inquisitors. But if they were forced to divulge Abraham Thorn's secrets, that was his problem, not theirs. He had had no right to take her memories in the first place, and now that he'd given them back to her, they were hers to do with as she saw fit – including share them. And Julia deserved to know that her brother had died a hero.

“We'll take care of Charlie,” Beatrice assured her.

“Really,” Martin said earnestly, with no smirk or trace of teasing on his face. He just looked at Alexandra seriously, and took Charlie's cage from her. Inside, Charlie cried out, “Alexandra!” and fluttered around within the confines of the cage.

Alexandra had already known that Julia would be taking a Portkey back to Salem, but Ms. King had informed her that morning that if Alexandra didn't want to endure the train ride back to Chicago, she could travel by Portkey as well. And Alexandra had agreed, because she really didn't feel like riding the Roanoke Underhill again.

Julia's warning that Portkey travel, especially at that distance, was uncomfortable, did not deter her. But animals didn't travel well by Portkey, and they also cost as much as a human fare. Rather than asking Ms. King to pay an additional exorbitant fee for Charlie, Alexandra agreed to send the raven back by Wizardrail. Fortunately, the BMI students who had come back to Blacksburg for Maximilian's funeral were returning to Charmbridge for the final two weeks of the semester, and Beatrice and Martin had promised Alexandra that they would bring Charlie safely back to the academy with them.

Alexandra wasn't entirely happy about this, and Charlie was even less so, but it seemed like a reasonable arrangement.

"Behave, Charlie," she said. "I'll see you this evening."

"Alexandra!" Charlie squawked. Alexandra felt guilty, and almost decided then and there to take the Wizardrail instead, but then she looked back over her shoulder, where Julia and Ms. King were waiting in the carriage.

"Thanks, then," she told the Stormcrows. "I'll see you when you get back to Charmbridge."

Beatrice nodded. "I wish I were going by Portkey. Just don't hold your breath."

"I'll remember that." Alexandra walked back out of the Wizardrail station, trying to ignore Charlie's angry caws, and climbed back into the carriage outside. Ms. King pulled on the Thestral's reins, and they went trotting down the road, to a much newer building made of brick, also concealed in a copse of trees, behind a sign that said only, 'Portkeys.'

As they got out of the carriage, each carrying only one bag, Julia took Alexandra's hand. Alexandra smiled wanly at her sister, and they walked hand-in-hand into the Portkey station.

Julia had cried for a long time, after hearing Alexandra's tale. Alexandra had sat up with her, long into the night, and they were both tired now, but that was nothing compared to the relief Alexandra felt that Julia had not turned on her, had not screamed at her that Alexandra shouldn't have let Maximilian go to the Lands Below, or that she shouldn't have gone with him, or most of all, that she should never have allowed her brother to die in her place.

That Julia didn't say these things did not mean Alexandra still didn't think them, though.

“Girls,” said Ms. King, returning from the counter, where she had paid for two Portkey trips with what looked to Alexandra like a very large stack of Lions.

She opened her arms, and gave Alexandra another warm embrace.

“You will always be welcome at Croatoa,” Ms. King murmured, with her thick arms wrapped around Alexandra's shoulders. “I want you and Julia to stay in touch.”

“Me, too,” Alexandra mumbled. “Thank you.”

Then Ms. King embraced her daughter. Julia, who had managed to remain composed for most of the morning, burst into tears again, and the two King witches stood together, holding one another, for several long minutes, Ms. King murmuring into her daughter's ear. Alexandra waited patiently. It wasn't as if she were in a hurry, and Portkeys didn't run on a schedule.

Finally, Julia's mother released her from her embrace, and Julia and Alexandra faced one another.

“Promise you will come back, to visit,” Julia said. “And write, as often as you like. Summer...” She swallowed. “Summer is going to be very lonely here.”

“I will.” Alexandra nodded. Summer in Larkin Mills was going to be lonely, too, she thought. “I'll write every week, at least. And I'll come see you if I can, if your mother and mine both say it's okay –”

“Of course they will.”

Julia pulled her younger sister into a tight embrace, and pressed her hot cheek against Alexandra's. Alexandra hugged her back.

“You are my sister,” Julia whispered in her ear. “Now and forever.”

Alexandra nodded. “I know,” she whispered back.

Julia released her, then cupped Alexandra's face in her hands. She leaned forward and gave her a kiss on both cheeks, and then looked her in the eye.

"It wasn't your fault," she whispered, eyes glistening.

Alexandra gulped, and couldn't answer. She just stared at her sister, as Julia picked up her bag. A wizard in a uniform similar to those worn by the ticket agents at the Wizardrail station had just carried a large antique silver spoon into one of the booths, holding it on a red velvet pillow. He set it on a shelf in the booth and stepped back. Julia walked into the Portkey booth and gave Alexandra and her mother a final wave, as the Portkey agent closed the door.

A moment later, he opened it, and removed the pillow. Julia, and the spoon, were gone.

Another uniformed agent was now carrying a car tire, dangling from a heavy silver chain, into another booth. He set it down and slid the chain out, without touching the tire, then gestured at Alexandra to enter.

She looked at Maximilian's mother. "Good-bye, Ms. King."

"Good-bye, Alexandra."

Alexandra stepped into the booth, and the agent closed the door behind her.

A sensation like being hooked behind your navel and jerked through space, they had told her. She almost took a breath, before remembering Beatrice's advice. So she exhaled slowly, and then touched the tire.

The 'hook' felt like one that a side of beef would be hung on, and Alexandra knew immediately why Beatrice had warned her not to hold her breath. She felt as if she'd been ripped right out of her shoes – indeed, she wouldn't have been surprised to arrive naked, her clothes left behind. There was a moment that seemed to stretch out and out, as she tumbled through space, yanked on an invisible line,

and then she stumbled against the inside of the booth, and felt the rubber of the tire under her fingers. Panting, she sucked in a breath, and leaned against the wall. All that, and nothing had happened!

Then someone opened the door, and she saw that she was looking out at the Chicago Wizardrail station.

It was chaos. Witches and wizards were running in all directions, a voice was urging calm over the Wizard Wireless loudspeaker, and Aurors were using Petrification and Impediment Jinxes to keep the crowds from stampeding.

Alexandra had no idea what was going on. Then a hand reached into the booth and grabbed her by the arm.

"Hello, Alexandra," Diana Grimm greeted her, with a humorless smile. "Did you have a pleasant trip?"

Enemy of the Confederation

Ms. Grimm brought Alexandra to a room very similar to the one where she'd been interrogated last time, when she and Maximilian had returned from Roanoke together. She was left sitting there, angry and confused, for almost an hour. When the Special Inquisitor finally returned, she did not bring a can of soda, and she was not smiling.

"Do you have any idea what's going on, Alexandra?" Ms. Grimm asked.

"No," Alexandra answered honestly. "I don't."

Grimm gave her a long, hard stare, and Alexandra wondered if she were using Legilimency. She practiced thinking about nothing, but she knew she was probably doing a very poor job of it.

"Did your father show up at the funeral?" Ms. Grimm asked quietly.

Alexandra's expression hardened. "No."

"Have you had any contact with him —"

"Since he Obliviated me? No. I don't know any more than I did the last time you talked to me. Do you want to make me drink some more Veritaserum? Or read my mind? Is Mr. Raspire interrogating Julia right now?" Alexandra glared at Ms. Grimm. She was consumed with fury. It was the first time in days that she'd felt anything besides grief and guilt, and she savored it. "You do realize we just got back from my brother's funeral?"

Ms. Grimm gazed back at her calmly, and then reached out and seized her wrist. "Come with me."

Alexandra was too startled to resist, as the woman dragged her to her feet and walked with her out of the interrogation room, down a set of stairs, and through what appeared to be the back offices of the Wizardrail station.

Robed wizards and witches were frantically speaking into Whisperphones and looking into crystal balls. Dominating one wall was an immense hand-painted map of North America, criss-crossed with lines that appeared to represent Wizardrail and Automagicka routes; little animated trains and other vehicles crawled along it like bugs. A uniformed wizard pushed aside a clockwork golem that was trying to hand a scroll to anyone who passed by, and yelled, "The Deseret Rose is trapped under the Rockies!"

"Where are we going?" Alexandra demanded.

In response, Grimm's grip on her wrist tightened painfully. Alexandra wondered if she was being taken to wizard-jail or something. Had the Special Inquisitor seen in her mind that she'd been to the Lands Below – that she remembered?

She was even more startled when they walked out into the street. Ms. Grimm ignored the commotion outside the Wizardrail station, and when a couple of wizards in Auror uniforms approached her, she held up a gold badge and waved them off. They continued across the street, to a concrete wall with posters plastered all over it – Aglaope Bright opening for the Wyld Hunt next month, the Sheboygan Slammers and the Rockwood Rooks playing next week, a going-out-of-business-sale for Ilsing's Wizard Wares – but Ms. Grimm stopped in front of a spot that had been left bare and unplastered.

Alexandra was becoming even more angry now, at being dragged around like a child. Grimm tapped her wand against the concrete, and a door appeared. She opened the door, and thrust the girl through it.

Alexandra looked around. They were in a dusty corridor with plaster walls. Ms. Grimm pushed her forward again, and they stepped out into a familiar-looking laundromat.

"What –?" Alexandra demanded, and Ms. Grimm held a finger up, and pointed at the ceiling.

There were several Muggles in the laundromat. They glanced curiously at the professionally-dressed Ms. Grimm, and Alexandra in her long witch's robes, but it was the kind of place where people

didn't ask questions or talk to strangers, so no one approached them. Most were looking up, where Ms. Grimm was now pointing. Several small television sets had been anchored in brackets near the ceiling, giving laundromat customers something to watch while they did their laundry

On the screens was what looked like an aerial view of a disaster of some sort. A helicopter was flying above a large pile of wreckage. Alexandra thought at first that it must have been a tornado. Then, while the newscaster rambled on about rescue efforts and body counts, she saw the words scrolling along the bottom of the screen: "TRAIN DERAILMENT KILLS DOZENS."

"Your father's doing," Ms. Grimm informed her.

Alexandra stared at the screen, then at the Inquisitor. "W-what?" she stammered.

"That train," Ms. Grimm said, through clenched teeth, "was the Roanoke Underhill."

Alexandra turned pale. Wordlessly, she looked back at the screen.

"At about the same time you were saying good-bye to your friends at the Blacksburg Wizardrail station," Ms. Grimm told her, "the Roanoke Underhill eastbound went underhill. Except where it should have passed through, into the Lands Below, it did not. It hit solid earth, traveling at full speed."

"... no details about the train or its passengers available at this time..." the TV announcer was saying.

"Even Muggles notice when a train rolls over their houses," the Special Inquisitor said balefully. "The Thorn Circle has claimed responsibility. Abraham Thorn has effectively shut down Wizardrail travel throughout the country." Abruptly, the taller witch seized Alexandra by the front of her robes, and yanked her up onto her toes. "How do you suppose your father gained access to the Lands Below, Alexandra?" she shouted into the girl's face. "How did he gain control of the gateways? HOW?"

"I DON'T KNOW!" Alexandra shouted back.

"Hey! Lady!" One of the laundromat patrons, a middle-aged Hispanic man, stepped towards them, looking concerned. "I dunno what you're screaming about, but you shouldn't be shaking your daughter like that." He pointed a finger and waggled it in the witches' direction. "You ought to calm down."

Everyone else was staring at them. Ms. Grimm gave the man a look that caused him to take a step backwards, and then she looked down at Alexandra, and released her. Alexandra staggered.

"Do you understand?" Ms. Grimm hissed. "Your father did that!" She pointed at the TV screen. "That is why he is an enemy of the Confederation! Whatever sympathy you might feel for him, I want you to remember all the people who died today, wizards and Muggles alike. He did that! Is that the sort of thing you want to be a part of?"

Alexandra shook her head. "No," she whispered. She stared at Ms. Grimm, and then back at scenes of carnage on the television screen.

Ms. Grimm calmly smoothed Alexandra's collar, and nodded. The Muggles had all paused, while loading and pulling clothes out of their washers and dryers, and were staring at the two witches.

"Then," Grimm said, in a perfectly controlled tone of voice, as she drew her wand, "you'll tell me, if you remember anything, or learn anything, or hear anything? If your father contacts you, you won't refuse to tell us about it, out of misguided loyalty, or resentment because we ask hard questions when we're trying to stop a murderous Dark wizard?"

Alexandra swallowed and shook her head, eying the other witch's wand warily.

Ms. Grimm stared at her a moment longer, then nodded. She turned towards the Muggles, and pointed her wand.

“Obliviate!” she snapped. “Obliviate! Obliviate! Obliviate!” Alexandra jumped, as the Special Inquisitor pointed her wand at each witness in turn.

When she was done, the Muggles were all blinking, looking dazed and confused. Grimm turned back to Alexandra, and slid her wand back under the front of her jacket.

“We'd best get back to the station,” she said. “I believe the Charmbridge bus will be taking you back to the academy now. I'm afraid your friends from Blacksburg are going to take quite a while to reach Chicago.”

Beatrice and Martin and the rest of the Stormcrows did eventually make their way back to Charmbridge, though the Charmbridge bus had to go all the way to Appalachia to fetch them. It was the next day by the time they arrived, and Charlie sulked and would not come near Alexandra for a day after that.

Alexandra's familiar wasn't the only one shunning her. As soon as she arrived back at Charmbridge, she sensed students and teachers alike staring at her, and voices whispering behind her back, everywhere she went.

No one made jokes about her father anymore. She thought her reputation had reached rock bottom the previous year. But before, her notorious father had been a name most of her classmates had only heard in the past tense. Now, after thirteen years, Abraham Thorn was no longer just a warlock in hiding. He was once more an active enemy of the Confederation, and people were afraid.

Angelique avoided her, but Anna and David unhesitatingly declared that they didn't care about her father. Alexandra wasn't sure about the Pritchards at first – they still sat with her in the cafeteria, but for the first few days, they were very quiet, and she got the impression that they were uncomfortable about her presence. She wondered unhappily whether she was going to lose them as friends.

She continued attending JROC drills in the final weeks, without enthusiasm. The BMI students were actually more supportive of her

than her fellow mages from Charmbridge. Ms. Shirtliffe suggested that she would do well if she continued, but Alexandra had no enthusiasm for wearing the JROC uniform again.

If not for Anna and David, she might have withdrawn completely. It was they who dragged her, unwillingly, to the seventh grade rec room the Saturday night before their last week of classes and the end-of-year SPAWNs. Alexandra was not in the mood for Wizardopoly or Heart of Three Kingdoms.

Constance and Forbearance were seated together on a sofa, wringing their hands and looking anxious. The other students in the room vacated when Alexandra arrived. To Alexandra's surprise, the Ozarkers scooted apart, and patted the sofa between them, indicating they wanted her to sit there. She did, looking confused.

"Alexandra Quick," Constance began.

"You know we treasure you dear," said Forbearance.

Alexandra nodded uncertainly. "Umm, thanks. I... treasure you, too."

She let out a startled breath as the Pritchards both hugged her.

"You're troublesome and wicked as can be!" Forbearance scolded.

"But brave and true," Constance declared, squeezing Alexandra tightly.

"And we know you wouldn't never set down no boon friend," Forbearance said.

"Of course I wouldn't," Alexandra replied. She wasn't sure whether to be touched or worried. "But..."

"Our Ma and Pa don't approve the least bit of us consortin' with your likes," Forbearance sighed, as they let go of her.

Constance nodded seriously, and looked down. "All year, they been owlin' us and even threatenin' a howler, since we mistakenly let out you was our friend."

"They already drew an idy you was our friend," Forbearance said. "But we told 'em we don't fix to set you by."

"Course we said it more mannerly, to our Ma and Pa." Constance blushed.

Alexandra glanced at David and Anna, and back at the Pritchards. "I understand. And thanks –"

"No, Alex, you don't understand t'all," Constance interrupted.

"What we're sayin' is, we might not be here next year." Forbearance was now sniffing, and wiping at her eyes.

"Ma and Pa ain't amenable to send us back to Charmbridge if we'all is gonna make social with unrespectable sorts."

"We can't lie to our Ma and Pa, Alexandra, we just can't," Forbearance said tearfully.

"We ain't a'gonna swear to shun you."

"But if we don't, they might not allow us to come back."

Everyone was quiet for a while. Then Alexandra said, "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. You shouldn't have to quit school because of me. Maybe I won't come back."

Everyone looked startled at that.

"That hain't what we want t'all!" Constance protested.

"Don't you dare draw such a notion!" Forbearance admonished her.

"We'll kill our own snakes," Constance said firmly. "Don't you own what hain't your'n. We just want you to know, we is always gonna be your friend, and whatever happens, it hain't your fault!"

Alexandra swallowed, and nodded.

"We all want you to know that, Alex," Anna said softly. "We're your friends." She knelt in front of Alexandra, looking up at her. "We know this has been a terrible time. Especially with what... what happened with Max." She laid her hands over Alexandra's and the Pritchards'. "You haven't talked about what happened. I know you don't remember exactly how... what happened, wherever you went and whatever you did."

Alexandra looked away, blinking quickly, as Anna continued. "But we know it hurts, a lot. And I know you keep hiding things."

"Is this, like, an intervention?" Alexandra demanded.

Anna's brow wrinkled, then she shook her head. "We just don't want you to think you're all alone."

Forbearance put an arm around Alexandra's shoulders. "Swear you'll keep owlin' and you won't talk us fancy 'bout how everythin's bees an' sunshine," she said.

"Or we'll bug you all summer," David said. "I'll even have my folks drive me to Larkin Mills."

Alexandra rolled her eyes. "Yeah, that'll convince my parents you don't want to be my boyfriend."

She looked around at her friends, and couldn't speak, around the lump in her throat. For a moment, she had to close her eyes and take deep breaths.

"Girls..." David declared, shaking his head, but that was immediately punctuated by a yelp, as Constance kicked his ankle, hard.

"Thank you," Alexandra said. "I... I care about all of you, too." She looked at David. "Even you, dork."

Hopping on one foot, he grimaced at her.

"I will talk to you," Alexandra promised. "And... I'll be okay."

Her friends nodded. Anna was less convinced than the rest, but they all looked relieved.

Alexandra forced herself to spend more time with them, for the remaining week of class. She held her head up when she walked through the school, not looking at the students who were whispering or shrinking away from her. Her father was an enemy of the Confederation, but she wasn't him.

She took her SPAWNs without really caring about the results. She ignored Mr. Grue's dire mutterings during her Alchemy test. She made no mistakes, and he seemed happy to dismiss her as quickly as possible. Mrs. Middle seemed terrified that Alexandra might not score well on Wizard History, and be forced to repeat her class. In a fit of spite, Alexandra mentioned her father or the Dark Convention every place she could think of in her final essay.

For her final SPAWN practical assessment in Basic Magical Defense, she met Ms. Shirtliffe once more, in an empty classroom.

"How are you feeling, Miss Quick?" asked the teacher.

"Fine." Alexandra faced her impassively, with her wand at the ready, but Shirtliffe didn't start the test immediately.

"You are not fine," Ms. Shirtliffe said. "We both know that."

"I thought you were testing me in Basic Magical Defense, not how I feel." Even while not wearing her JROC uniform, she knew her tone was inappropriate, but most of the teachers were content to keep their interactions with her terse and minimal, and she wished Ms. Shirtliffe would do the same.

A thin smile crossed the teacher's scarred face. "How you feel affects how hard I can come at you. It also concerns me, because I think you're a talented witch, and I'd hate to see this tragedy undermine your potential."

"Whatever my potential might be," Alexandra answered slowly, "I don't think it's as a Regimental Officer." She pointed her wand at the Witch-Colonel. "As for how hard you can come at me – bring it on."

Shirtliffe raised an eyebrow, and then her wand crackled with lightning, and Alexandra was thrown across the room.

Alexandra rose to her feet, but knew she was only able to stand because Ms. Shirtliffe let her. Angrily, she exchanged hexes with the teacher, until desks were shattered between them, and the walls were scorched, and then Ms. Shirtliffe ended the duel by Deadweighting Alexandra's wand hand.

While Alexandra removed the curse with the counterspell Maximilian had taught her, Ms. Shirtliffe calmly repaired the damaged walls and furniture.

"Well done, Miss Quick," Ms. Shirtliffe said. "But your potential is still just that – potential."

Alexandra nodded, and left the room. She waited until she was closing the door before she muttered, "Whatever," under her breath.

She thought she was coping well. She had done fine on her SPAWNs. She even convinced herself that she was okay. Every night, though, she dreamed of Maximilian, and the Lands Beyond.

There was an end-of-the-year party to say good-bye to the MASE Program students. Alexandra wore her JROC uniform for the last time, as she shook hands with Tybalt Franklin, Pierce Prince, Adelaide Speir, and finally, Martin Nguyen and Beatrice Hawthorne. All of them gave their condolences once more. There was one final memorial for Maximilian, where to Alexandra's embarrassment, the entire JROC stood at attention and saluted her, as she held a plaque, with a

photograph of Maximilian in uniform, that would be placed on the wall of Charmbridge's JROC Headquarters.

She didn't cry, even when Beatrice and Martin got teary-eyed as they said good-bye.

"I meant what I said," Martin told her. "If you or Julia ever need anything..."

She nodded.

Beatrice smiled at her sadly, and then gave her a small hug. "You're not going to stay in JROC, are you?" she asked.

"No." Alexandra shook her head.

"I don't blame you." Beatrice sighed. She patted Alexandra on the shoulder. "Take care, Alexandra. And stay in touch." She regarded the younger witch seriously. "Max and I, there really wasn't ever anything between us but friendship, you know." Her eyes glistened. "But I will always miss him."

"Me, too," Alexandra whispered.

The BMI students left earlier than originally planned; the Roanoke Underhill, and most other Wizardrail lines, remained shut down indefinitely, which meant travel across the Confederation was by bus, except for the rare few who could afford to take a Portkey (and Portkey travel also had been severely restricted by the Auror Authority).

Mrs. Speaks was spending an entire week taking students not just to Chicago, but everywhere in Central Territory, and those like Anna and Angelique who lived even further away also had to leave early, taking specially chartered buses to California or Louisiana.

Anna's departure was two days before Alexandra's. They spent their last days at Charmbridge making plans to stay in touch, by owl and other means. Anna had never used a computer, though she had a vague idea how they worked, and she was familiar with telephones.

Her mother, she promised, would help her, so that she and Alexandra could talk every day.

"You don't have to call every day," Alexandra told her. "If you check up on me that often, I'm going to get annoyed."

Anna looked worried, but Alexandra smiled reassuringly at her friend. "I'm kidding. Sort of."

Anna nodded. When she boarded the bus that was taking Charmbridge students to the West Coast, she waved good-bye once more, and Alexandra waved back, then turned away, to find herself face to face with Tomo Matsuzaka.

She hadn't spoken to the Japanese girl in months, and certainly not since her brother's death. For a moment, she thought she'd just accidentally put herself in between Tomo and the bus, so she stepped aside, wordlessly, but Tomo cleared her throat, and looked up, meeting her eyes nervously.

"I just wanted to say thanks," the Majokai witch whispered.

Alexandra raised her eyebrows. "Thanks?"

"You saved me. From the Mors Mortis Society." Tomo looked down again. "I'm really sorry about your brother," she mumbled quickly. "And I don't think you're Dark."

She brushed past Alexandra, who turned to watch her board the bus. Tomo didn't look back.

If that surprised her, she was even more surprised the next afternoon, while she was in her room packing for the next morning's departure, when a knock came from the other side of the door to the shared bathroom.

Alexandra opened it. Angelique stood there, arms crossed nervously across her chest. The other girl's things were stacked on the floor of the room behind her, waiting for Charmbridge's elves to collect them.

Honey was in her Silenced travel cage, sitting on top of a pile of suitcases.

Angelique had not spoken to Alexandra since her return from Roanoke. Now she looked nervous, almost fearful. Alexandra just folded her arms and waited.

"I hope you don't hate me." Angelique sounded sad and a little scared.

Alexandra frowned. "Why, because you're afraid I'll curse you?"

Angelique winced. Alexandra realized she probably was afraid of that. But the other girl replied, "I really didn't know just how... how deep Darla was getting into Dark Arts. I still don't understand." She shook her head, and tears glistened in her eyes. "I don't know what happened to her, Alexandra. But I couldn't abandon her. She was my friend." Angelique bit her lip. "You can understand that, can't you?"

Alexandra gave Darla's ex-roommate a hard stare, and then, in a slightly softer tone, answered, "Yeah."

"Maybe her parents will straighten her out," Angelique went on hopefully. "She won't be around the Mors Mortis Society anymore. I... I sent her an owl, and she wrote back. She said the Juvenile Magical Offenses Division isn't filing charges against her."

"I guess having an uncle who's a Congressman helps," Alexandra remarked dryly.

Angelique looked down again. "Take care, Alexandra," she mumbled. "I'm really grateful to you, for saving Honey. I'm sure you didn't want to. And I'm so terribly sorry about your brother."

Alexandra paused, looking at the nervous New Orleans girl, then nodded. "Thanks. You take care, too. See you next year, I guess."

Angelique smiled weakly, and then an elf appeared in her room. "Is Miss ready to go?" he asked. Angelique held up a hand and gave Alexandra a tentative finger-wave, before turning around. Then she

paused, and looked over her shoulder, just as Alexandra was closing the bathroom door.

“Oh, by the way,” Angelique murmured, blushing a little, “you can tell David, I do like him.”

The elf had reminded Alexandra of one more set of farewells she owed, so the evening before she was to leave Charmbridge, she went to the library. It was the first time she had set foot in the library since returning from the Lands Below. She was pleased that Mrs. Minder didn't look afraid or horrified at her presence, but Alexandra's heart was hammering in her chest when the librarian took her downstairs to see Bran and Poe.

The two library elves looked at Alexandra with surprised, sad eyes.

“Hi guys,” Alexandra murmured. She waited for Mrs. Minder to leave, before sitting down in front of them. She put her hands on her lap, not sure what to say.

“I guess you know what happened,” she said quietly, at last.

“Yes, Alex,” Bran replied.

“Everything?” Alexandra mumbled.

The two elves looked at each other, and back at her, and nodded.

“We is very sorry about Miss Alex's brother,” said Poe.

“It is a terrible, terrible, sad thing,” Bran said, in a creaky voice.

Alexandra nodded.

“I used the obol,” she whispered.

The elves nodded again. “We knows that,” Bran replied quietly.

“We heard Miss Alex does not remember, though,” Poe said.

Alexandra swallowed, and looked up at them.

"Have you talked to Em?" she asked.

They blinked slowly.

"Why would we have talked to Em?" Bran asked.

Alexandra took a deep breath. "I want you to know," she told them, "that I'm going to treat elves right from now on."

"Alex has always been kind to elves." Bran's forehead wrinkled, while Poe tilted his head, but both of them seemed to be studying her very intently.

"I've tried. But..." She swallowed. "Will you tell Em that I'm sorry, please?"

Bran and Poe were both very quiet. Then Bran inquired, "How would Miss Alex know that she should be sorry to Em?"

Alexandra just looked back at them, with a pained expression. They stared at one another silently for a long time, and then at last, Bran and Poe both nodded solemnly.

"We will tell her," promised Bran.

"But," Poe added, lowering his voice to a whisper, "someday, Miss Alex needs to be telling her that herself."

"I will." Alexandra nodded. She hesitated, then gave each of the library elves a hug, which they did not resist.

"Alexandra Quick is a good witch," Bran declared.

"A naughty girl, but a good witch," Poe agreed.

The vagaries of the bus schedule put Alexandra, David, and the Pritchards on the Charmbridge bus together. David and Alexandra played wizard chess, while Constance and Forbearance played

Witches' Whist, until they reached Detroit, where David packed up his wizard chess set, and said good-bye to the three girls.

"No need for hugs," he said.

"Course not," Forbearance replied primly. Constance gave him a smile that was almost a smirk.

Alexandra stood up to say good-bye to him. He looked at her, and cleared his throat. "Take care, Alex. And we'll talk on the phone and chat online, right? I meant everything I said before."

She nodded.

"But you don't need to hug me either." He held out his hand.

"Okay." She grabbed his face in her hands, and gave him a kiss on the lips. He let out a startled squawk louder than the one Charlie made.

She released him, and patted his cheek. "Have a good summer, dork. Oh, and Angelique said she likes you."

"What?" he sputtered, wiping his mouth.

"She did." Alexandra sat back down, and smiled wickedly at him.

Constance and Forbearance were both staring at her, open-mouthed, as David stumbled towards the front of the bus.

"You are awful, Alexandra Quick!" Constance huffed, but her outrage dissipated quickly. After their initial shock, the two Ozarkers actually looked more relieved than offended.

She joined them for Witches' Whist on the trip to Larkin Mills, grateful that they could say good-bye at her stop, instead of her having to hide when they reached the Ozark drop-off point where their family would pick them up.

"I'll miss you guys, a lot," she told them, when the Charmbridge bus turned down Sweetmaple Avenue. Constance and Forbearance were both looking curiously out the window, excited to see the real, live Muggle neighborhood where Alexandra actually lived.

They turned to her and nodded.

"We'll miss you terrible, too," replied Constance.

"But don't fret overmuch," Forbearance said.

"I really will stop going to Charmbridge if that's what it takes to let you _"

"Alexandra Quick! Not another word!" The twins both fixed her with fierce stares, and she sighed.

"You owl us and we'll owl back," Forbearance promised, giving her a hug. Her sister joined her in embracing Alexandra.

"We'll get Ma and Pa to see clear," Constance assured her.

And then Alexandra was trudging up the aisle of the bus, carrying her suitcase and Charlie's cage, passing the few remaining students, most of whom avoided looking at her.

"Have a good summer, Miss Quick," said Mrs. Speaks, as she opened the door.

"Thanks." Alexandra stepped off the bus, and found her mother waiting for her. They stood there and looked at each other silently, even after Mrs. Speaks closed the door, and the bus rolled away.

"Did you have a good semester?" Mrs. Green asked.

Alexandra bit her lip, silenced a thousand screaming thoughts in her head, and nodded, not looking at her mother.

"Miss you terrible," Charlie said, and her mother looked down at the raven, snorted, and then put an arm around her daughter's shoulders, as they walked back into the house together.

Claudia Green cleared her throat, taking a deep breath, as if bracing herself, and asked, "Is there... do you want to talk about anything?"

Alexandra turned her head to look at her mother. Her mother looked back at her, with doubt and worry in her eyes.

Alexandra shook her head. "No. Don't worry about it." She forced a smile. "Nothing I can't leave behind."

Claudia nodded. Her expression was uncertain and relieved at the same time.

Her mother and stepfather's schedules still didn't allow them to be home most days, and to Alexandra's chagrin, thirteen was still not old enough to be allowed to stay home alone all summer, in their opinion. After some initial resistance, she agreed to choose from the options they presented her, and so wound up enrolled in summer school classes at Larkin Mills Middle School.

This gave her something to talk about with David, as his parents, too, wanted him to make some attempt to keep up with his Muggle education. Alexandra was permitted to use the computer more often, as (she argued) she needed it for her classwork. Mostly she played online games, and chatted with David. She also sent an email to her half-sister Valeria, not expecting to receive a reply any time soon – if ever.

Perhaps it was her quietude, her relative lack of resistance to summer school, or just her sullen, unargumentative demeanor towards Archie, but her mother seemed to sense something was wrong. Yet Alexandra deflected every query, a little perturbed at the unusual level of attention her mother was giving her.

She knew her mother didn't really want to hear the truth. And besides, Claudia had been Obliviated once by the Wizard Justice Department.

Alexandra wasn't going to put her mother in danger of having that done to her again.

She didn't really need to talk about what had happened. She was dealing with it.

In the first weeks that Alexandra was home, owls flew frequently to and from Larkin Mills. Jingwei was the first to arrive; Anna must have sent her practically as soon as she'd arrived back in San Francisco. Another arrived from Julia shortly thereafter. The Pritchards' barn owls brought word from the Ozarks, that while their Ma and Pa remained 'somewhat unpersuadable,' Constance and Forbearance still had faith that by the time September rolled around, they would be back on the bus to Charmbridge.

In her room, in the evening, Alexandra listened to her Wizard Wireless. Sometimes she listened to wizard bands, and sometimes she listened to the news. The name 'Abraham Thorn' appeared to be censored; he was referred to as 'the Enemy of the Confederation.' But he and the Dark Convention were all that the Wizard Wireless Company, the American Wizarding Network, and the Confederation News Network talked about; every speaker on the news worried about how vulnerable the country was to Dark Arts, and the Governor-General was campaigning to push the Wizards' Congress into granting him and all the Territorial Governors more powers to secure the safety of the Confederation.

It was on one of these evenings, after she had just turned off the Wizard Wireless so she wouldn't have to listen to Governor-General Hucksteen's voice anymore, when she heard a crack, followed by a startled caw from Charlie. She whirled around, and had her wand in her hand without even thinking about it.

A scarred elf with a missing ear stood in the middle of her room, cringing away from her.

"Quimley!" she exclaimed.

"Fly! Fly!" cried Charlie.

"Hush, Charlie!" Alexandra ordered, worried that her mother might ask what was causing Charlie to fuss so. She lowered her wand.

"Quimley," she whispered. "I thought..." Her voice trailed off. She wasn't sure what she'd thought. Her last sight of the former house-elf had been in those terrible moments as she was carried away from the Gift-Place, clinging to her broom. He had been surrounded by Generous Ones, and she didn't think they would have been happy about his helping her to escape.

"Quimley has brought back the things that belonged to Abraham Thorn's children," Quimley mumbled.

Alexandra's breath caught in her throat, as he held out Maximilian's backpack.

"I don't understand." In shock, she took the pack from the elf.

"These things Abraham Thorn's children did not gift to the Generous Ones, so they has no right to keep them," Quimley said.

She opened the pack, and looked inside. She saw a Skyhook, a box she knew contained medicinal potions, a couple of MRMs, and two hard brown lumps that were probably Flaming Dungbombs. The pack was more spacious inside than out, but she was unwilling to reach her hand inside and rummage around. She knew it would contain Maximilian's things. His clothes, that little Wick-No-Nick Razor he used to shave, maybe his toothbrush... She closed her eyes, and her fingers dug into the material.

"Weren't the Generous Ones angry at you, Quimley?" She opened her eyes. "You... you saved my life. I'd never have escaped without you." She looked at Charlie. "Charlie either."

Charlie made an uncertain crackling sound.

"They was angry." Quimley nodded. "But they will not be harming Quimley."

Alexandra shook her head. "I don't understand." Then another thought came to her. "You can travel between the Lands Below and here!" And she sucked in a breath. "You – you could have brought me and my brother back!" She stood up, her voice rising, but Quimley shook his head rapidly.

"No, Miss," Quimley quavered. "Not both of you. Only one, only while the Generous Ones was not watching."

"You could have taken Maximilian!" she whispered.

"Quimley offered," the elf told her sadly. "But Maximilian Thorn would not leave without his sister. Alexandra Thorn was in the Generous Ones' power. Quimley had no power to take Miss back, until her brother –"

Alexandra swallowed, and looked down, staring into Maximilian's pack again. "He traded places with me."

Quimley nodded.

She saw some of the things the Generous Ones had 'gifted' them: the little talking stone heads (which were, thankfully, silent at the moment), the magical wooden sticks, a carved snake... and then she spotted something white, sitting on top of the box of potions. She tilted the pack a little, and felt a cold chill as she recognized the object.

"You put... that thing in here," she said. "The bone flute."

"The Generous Ones gave it to Miss. She should have it back."

"I don't want it!" she yelled, and she hurled the pack across her room, into her closet. Quimley jumped, and winced as it made a thump against the far wall. Alexandra looked at the elf, and remembered her words to Bran and Poe.

"I'm sorry, Quimley." She slid to the floor, next to her bed, and brought her knees up to her chest. "I just... it was my fault... and I miss him so much..."

It was easier, somehow, to admit this to the strange ex-house-elf. She didn't even feel embarrassed when she realized that her shoulders were shaking, and tears were running down her face, the first time since Maximilian's funeral. Charlie fluttered down to land on her knee, and cooed. She bowed her head, letting tears fall onto her lap.

"Not Miss's fault," said Quimley.

She didn't reply.

"Quimley could not find Miss, after she escaped the Generous Ones. In the Lands Below, not possible. In the wizard-world, Quimley cannot go." The elf shuddered. "But here, Quimley could find Alexandra Thorn."

"Alexandra Quick!" she snapped, and immediately softened her voice again, as the elf flinched.

"I'm sorry, Quimley," she whispered. "Just call me Alex. And... thank you. I'm very grateful."

The elf looked wide-eyed.

"What will happen to you now?" she asked. "Where will you go?"

"Go?" Quimley looked astonished at the question. "Quimley will go back to the Lands Below."

She shook her head. "I don't understand. Aren't you... free?"

Unlike all the house-elves Alexandra had known, Quimley didn't cringe at that word. He merely looked sad.

"Quimley is free." He nodded. "But Quimley's place is with the Generous Ones."

"You could... you could stay here." It wasn't really realistic, she knew... but then, why not? "There's plenty of space in the attic... or my room,

and the room next to this one, as long as you make sure my mom and my stepdad don't catch you –”

Quimley's eyes showed a tiny flicker of amusement.

“Quimley thanks Miss. But Quimley thinks Miss is forgetting that house-elves, even free house-elves, is forbidden in Muggle houses. And the Confederation...” Quimley's voice trembled. “They will know, if Quimley stays.”

The Trace Office, she thought. She considered offering Quimley a place at Croatoa, instead. Surely Ms. King would make a home for him there –

“Quimley must go now,” the elf said quietly. “Good-bye, Abraham Thorn's daughter.”

“No, wait,” she protested, but the elf disappeared with a pop.

She rubbed at her eyes.

“Miss you terrible,” Charlie crooned.

She looked at the raven, and nodded.

“I do,” she murmured. She rose to her feet, and went to put Maximilian's pack deeper in her closet, underneath her winter clothes and old toys, where her mother (who rarely entered her room nowadays anyway) would not discover it.

She and David talked occasionally by phone, though she actually preferred texting. Her mother had, reluctantly, paid for a limited account she could use over the summer. But Alexandra was delighted one evening when she received an incoming call from a number she didn't recognize, and upon answering, heard Anna's voice.

“Hi Alex! Guess where I am?”

“San Francisco?”

Anna laughed. "Yes! Of course. But I'm at a pay phone. Do you know how hard those are to find nowadays?"

Alexandra grinned. "So now you can call me. That's great, Anna!"

"How are you, Alex?" Anna's voice became serious.

Alexandra's smile faded. "I'm fine, Anna."

"Alex..."

"I'm okay," Alexandra insisted. "Don't worry, Anna. I haven't been hassled by anyone from the WJD – yet – and I'm getting along fine with my mom and my stepfather. I just talked to David last night, and I got an owl from Julia the day before yesterday. Everyone's been great."

Then an automated voice interrupted: "Please deposit seventy-five cents for an additional two minutes."

"Oh, crap!" Anna blurted out. "I didn't bring any more quarters!"

"Try email!" Alexandra called out, and then they were disconnected.

I'm fine, Alexandra repeated to herself, as she set her phone in its charger.

She dreamed of the Lands Below that night, a nightmare ending with a terrible musical tone repeating over and over as she fell through an endless black void, screaming Maximilian's name.

"Max!" she cried out, sitting up with a start.

"Maximilian!" repeated Charlie, sitting in the cage over her desk, and then she realized her phone was ringing. She glanced at the clock. It was just past midnight. She wiped her forehead, and hoped Archie and her mother hadn't heard the noise. She grabbed the phone, wondering who would be calling her at this hour, and saw a blank screen where the caller ID should have been.

Cautiously, feeling disoriented and a bit annoyed, with her pulse still racing, she flipped it open.

"Hello?" she said.

"Hello, Alexandra."

Her heart skipped a beat, and her breath caught in her throat.

"Alexandra? Can you hear me?" A trace of irritation crept into her father's voice.

"I hear you." Alexandra's fingers squeezed the phone tightly. "Why are you calling me?"

"The Wizard Justice Department is watching you very closely," Abraham Thorn said. "I cannot even send Hagar to your house."

"It's possible to listen in on phone conversations, you know."

"So I have been told. I will be mindful of that, but the WJD is horribly inept when it comes to Muggle devices."

Alexandra closed her eyes. "I don't want to play these secret agent games. What do you want?"

"To find out if you are well. Alexandra, I know you must be terribly angry at me, and I cannot imagine how badly you are hurting..."

"You have no idea what I feel!" Alexandra hissed furiously.

He was quiet for a moment. "I know you will not understand, right now, and perhaps you never will. But no matter what you believe, my darling child, I love you, as much as I loved Maximilian. I want nothing more than to have all my children be safe and happy."

"How is what you did supposed to make us safe and happy?" she demanded, barely keeping her voice under control. "You caused

everything Max warned me about! Now we're the children of a Dark Lord again!"

"Dark Lord," he scoffed. "Alexandra, do you not begin to see just what sort of magic lies beneath the surface of the Confederation?"

"I saw a lot of dead people on the news," she retorted, in a flat voice. "My friends were on the Roanoke Underhill! If that had been the train going the other way..."

"Sometimes, terrible prices must be paid." His voice was grave. "No more terrible than the price that has been paid many times over in the past. But what the Wizard Wireless networks are not telling you is that I warned the Department of Magical Transportation what I was about to do. They chose not to believe me. Those deaths are on their heads. And I made sure none of your classmates were on board that train."

"What about the Muggle houses it rolled over? Did you warn them?"

Thorn was silent again.

"What do you want from me?" she whispered.

"Just to allow me to continue to talk to you. That you might, hopefully, someday, understand."

She shook her head, squeezing her eyes shut. Then she said, in a tight voice, "I think you want me to join you. You talked Max into joining you, somehow. Am I supposed to replace Max?"

"No one can replace Maximilian, Alexandra."

She swallowed. "I will join you," she said. "If —"

She paused, and her father said, "If what, my child?"

"You looked at my memories, didn't you? Don't deny it. I know about Pensieves. So you know exactly how Max died."

There was a longer pause. "And?" her father replied tersely.

"Tell me there's a way to bring him back." Suddenly, her heart was thudding in her chest, and she was almost breathless. She knew it was crazy, but surely there had to be a way? With magic...

Abraham Thorn did not reply, so she pressed on. "Dark Arts, trading with the Generous Ones, anything," she whispered. "I'll even let you sacrifice me, to bring him back. You're supposed to be a great wizard who knows magic no one else dares to use. Tell me there's a way to bring Maximilian back, and I'll join you. I'll do anything you want. I'll be the most obedient daughter you ever dreamed of." She wiped tears from her eyes. Where had those come from? "Please," she pleaded. "Just tell me it's possible."

It was as if an eternity in time and space hung between her and her father, and then she heard him speak at last, from her cell phone.

"No one can bring back the dead, Alexandra. That is not within my power."

She squeezed her eyes shut. The mad, irrational hope that had blossomed in her heart fluttered and died. But the idea did not.

"Then I don't think we really have anything else to talk about," she said, and hung up.

She stared at the cell phone for a while, half-expecting it to ring again. But it did not. Finally, she put it back on her desk, and looked up at Charlie, who had been quiet and attentive throughout her conversation.

"Good night, Charlie," she said.

"Good night," Charlie replied.

She laid her head down on the pillow, and closed her eyes. Eventually, she fell asleep.

End Year Two

A/N: Thank you, everyone, for reading. Thank you especially to those who reviewed – I really appreciate each and every one I get. Seriously, even though I don't usually respond to each review, and I don't beg for reviews at the end of every chapter, I am a total geek when it comes to checking my story stats, and logging on multiple times per day to see if I received any new reviews. I would continue writing anyway, I assure you, but feedback makes me very happy. Yes, even the concrit. So whether you've never reviewed before, or you've faithfully reviewed every chapter, why not make the author smile and leave a review now? :)

Now that the shameless begging is out of the way: obviously, Alexandra's story is far from finished. Rather than posting something here which may be out of date by the time you read this, years hence (by the way, I still love reviews even for stories that I finished long ago ;)), I will invite you to check out my LiveJournal, which you can find on my profile page. I will post updates and more information about my stories there. I use that LiveJournal only for fan fiction updates, not for general blogging, so it's pretty low traffic and you won't be getting random posts about my personal life or political opinions.

Oh, and have I mentioned that I love reviews?